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Christian revelation defended against the

THE

USEFULNESS, TRUTH, and EXCELLENCY

OF THE

Christian Revelation

DEFENDED

Against the *Objections* contain'd in a late Book,

INTITLED,

Christianity as old as the Creation, &c.

By JAMES FOSTER.

The THIRD EDITION, Corrected.

Μέμνησο ὅτι καὶ τὸ μετατίθεσθαι, καὶ ἔπεσθαι τῷ διορθοῦντι, ὁμοίως ΕΛΕΥΘΕΡΟΝ ἐστι Marc. Antonin.

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PRINCETON

THE

PREFACE.

THAT infidelity has increas'd among us very much of late, is a general observation. And as we believe Christianity to be a rational and excellent institution, it must seem the more strange to us, that this should happen in an age that boasts of free inquiry, *and would be thought neither to* receive, *nor* reject, *any religious opinions, but upon solid grounds. I shall not pretend to assign any causes of it that are* universal, *and much less to determine positively that it always proceeds from* vitious motives, *and the* influence of irregular passions; *because there are innumerable prejudices that insensibly byas and mislead the mind, where there is both a* good understanding, *and an* honest heart; *and general charges (which is the utmost length we can go; for of the principles and views by which particular persons are influenc'd nothing can be known certainly, till the secrets of all hearts are reveal'd) general charges, I say, of* insincerity, perverseness, *and* wilful error, *are*

as eaſily brought by bigots *and* enthuſiaſts *againſt the oppoſers of* falſe religions, *as by the defenders of the* true *againſt their antagoniſts. There is one thing, however, that appears to be a very* ſtrong *and* common *prejudice againſt the Chriſtian religion, which I cannot omit, ſince it depends entirely on* Chriſtians themſelves, *and conſequently, as they might have* prevented, *it is not yet out of their power to* remove *it; I mean thoſe* corruptions *in* doctrine, *and* groſs ſuperſtitions *in* worſhip, *by which they have defac'd the ſimplicity and beauty of* true Chriſtianity, *and which have been urg'd indeed with greater zeal than morality itſelf. Theſe the adverſaries of our religion, without examining farther, blend with its* original *and* eſſential *doctrines; and thus it is* condemn'd *for no other reaſon, but becauſe it has been* miſrepreſented. *A melancholy reflection this! that Chriſtians ſhould furniſh infidels with the* choiceſt weapons *to attack their own cauſe; but at the ſame time, on the ſide of unbelievers, a ſure argument of a* ſhallow *and* ſuperficial judgment *in theſe points, and which deſtroys all their pretences to* fair *reaſoning. For ſuch a method of proceeding is not doing common juſtice to the writings of the* New Teſtament; *nay farther, if the principles of any religion are to be taken thus* at ſecond hand, *and* rejected *without being* inquir'd *into, there is no rule left whereby to diſtinguiſh between* true *and* falſe *religions; and 'tis impoſſible that any revelation, which God may communicate to mankind, ſhould ever make* its way *in the world, even*

even though it be in itſelf moſt perfect, *and brings with it the* higheſt *and* nobleſt credentials.

THE author of Chriſtianity *&c. like moſt other oppoſers of revelation, puts on an* affected *concern for the purity of the Chriſtian religion, and would be thought to do it* honour *by ſhewing it to be only* a republication of the law of nature, *the original and univerſal religion of mankind. And indeed theſe writers are not to be blam'd for acting thus* in diſguiſe, *till they can declare openly againſt it* without danger. *But it were to be wiſh'd, methinks, that all unneceſſary terrors being remov'd, they might no longer be forc'd to the inconſiſtent pretence of* exalting *Chriſtianity by* deſtroying *it, and* honouring *it by repreſenting all its peculiar doctrines as* abſurd *and* ſenſeleſs. *In the mean time, as matters now ſtand, if we would come at their true ſentiments, we muſt interpret all their books by* this key. *Then we ſhall be in no danger of being deceiv'd, either by* ſpecious titles, *or* ſeeming conceſſions. *For the title, which our author, in particular, has given to his performance, ſince 'tis moſt evidently his intention to* ſubvert *the Chriſtian religion, can't but be univerſally underſtood to mean this, and this only,* Chriſtianity as old as the creation, or good for nothing; *or, which amounts to the ſame,* Chriſtianity, the moral doctrines of it excepted, ſuperſtition and enthuſiaſm.

IN my remarks upon this diſcourſe I have not conſider'd it chapter by chapter (a great part of it being nothing at all to my purpoſe; and for the reſt, the ſame ſentiments being often repeated, and falling in here and there without much method or connection) but have endeavour'd to digeſt the ſubſtance of it, ſo far as the cauſe of Chriſtianity *is concern'd, under proper heads, both for the greater* entertainment, *and* advantage, *of the reader. Nor have I carried the oppoſition ſo far, as to diſpute all the principles in it on which a* great ſtreſs *is laid; becauſe ſome of them appear to me, if* rightly explain'd *(a point indeed in which our author is very defective) to be* rational *and* juſt; *and only the* conſequences *he draws from them to be fallacious and ſophiſtical.*

THUS, for inſtance, I make no ſcruple to allow, that reaſon, *if it be rightly improv'd, is* ſufficient *to diſcover all the principles and duties of natural religion; or, that 'tis* ſufficient, *at all times, to teach men all that God requires of them in their various circumſtances; and have ſhewn, that notwithſtanding this, when reaſon is* actually corrupted *and* darken'd, *a revelation is never the leſs* deſirable, *or* uſeful. *But if we go farther, and urge the actual corruption of the world as a proof of the* inſufficiency *of* reaſon, in itſelf, *to teach men natural religion and morality, or*

thoſe

thoſe duties, which they are indiſpenſably oblig'd to know and practiſe in order to their acceptance *with God; and conſequently makes a revelation not only of* advantage *in* certain circumſtances, *but* abſolutely, *and* at all times, neceſſary; *beſides that we ſhall, I fear, hardly be able to account for its not being* univerſal, *ſince all our reaſonings are form'd upon the* general neceſſities *of mankind; beſides this, I ſay, we can never anſwer the very ſame argument retorted upon us from the ignorance and ſuperſtition of Chriſtians, againſt the* ſufficiency *even of* revelation. *In truth the argument is bad* either *way; for indolence, prejudice, and vitious affections will pervert and darken the* plaineſt rule. *And as the corruptions of the* Heathen *world, if they had been much greater than they really were, would, no more than they do now, have inferr'd the* inſufficiency *of* reaſon *as a guide* in itſelf; *it muſt follow by the ſame rule, that the degeneracy among Chriſtians, though it could be ſhewn to be more groſs than any* Pagans *were ever chargeable with, is no rational prejudice either againſt the* perfection, *or* perſpicuity, *of the* Chriſtian revelation. *For 'tis moſt evident, that in both caſes the event is not owing to a* defect *in the* original rule, *but to mens not* attending *to it, or* ſubſtituting *other* falſe rules *in the place of it; and the prevalency of ignorance, ſuperſtition, and vice, more in* ſome ages *than in* others, *may ariſe from a* great variety of circumſtances, *which, when they happen to concur, may make the*

plaineſt *and moſt* complete *rule of leſs uſe, than, in different circumſtances, another that is vaſtly more* obſcure *and* imperfect.

I HAVE nothing to add, but that, as I ſhall be ready, upon conviction, to correct any errors in the reaſoning *part; ſo, if the author of* Chriſtianity *&c. can ſhew that I have* miſrepreſented *his ſenſe, or treated him, in any reſpect,* uncivilly, *I promiſe to ask his pardon, and give him,* publicly, *all the ſatisfaction he can deſire.*

THE

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THE

THE

USEFULNESS, TRUTH, and EXCELLENCY

OF THE

Chriſtian Revelation

DEFENDED.

AS RELIGION is of the higheſt importance to mankind, *free* debates about it ought above all things to be encouraged. This is the only way to ſettle the true nature of it, and fix it upon a ſolid foundation, that *truth* and *falſhood*, *ſuperſtition* and *rational piety*, may not equally prevail under that venerable name: and to ſupport it by methods of *reſtraint* and *violence* is not only an infringement of the moſt ſacred *natural* rights of mankind, but a diſhonour to religion itſelf. It makes a *good cauſe* ſuſpected, and gives every *little inſinuation* of its *adverſaries*,

without proof, the air of probability. And as all honeſt men have no concern but for *truth*, and never ſuffer their paſſions, prejudices, or worldly intereſts to *influence* their religious inquiries, they can deſire nothing more than that the argument ſhould be clearly ſtated, and urg'd in its utmoſt ſtrength on *both ſides*; and muſt be as ready to *give up* any particular ſcheme of religion upon ſufficient evidence of its *falſhood*, as they were to *defend* and *propagate* it while they believ'd it to be *true*. Such perſons muſt be very unwilling that the *civil magiſtrate* ſhould interpoſe, to do that by *coercion* and *terror*, which can only be effected by *reaſon* and *perſuaſion*.

For my own part, I think it an ineſtimable happineſs, that we live not only in an *inquiſitive* age, that will take nothing upon *truſt*, but in a land of *liberty*, where perſons may urge their objections againſt the *eſtabliſh'd religion* with much more freedom, than in many other countries that are called by the *Chriſtian* name; in which the people, not being allow'd the uſe of their *reaſon*, and *free inquiry*, are ſwallowed up in the groſſeſt *enthuſiaſm* and *ſuperſtition*, and *ſlaves* in a double ſenſe, both to their *Princes* and their *Prieſts*. May this happy liberty increaſe, which I take to have a cloſe connection even with our *civil liberty*. Let thoſe who do not believe the *Chriſtian religion* be allow'd to throw off all *diſguiſes*, and attack it with all the skill and ſtrength of argument they are capable of. Let not ſuch as write

write in defence of it claim any priviledge above their opponents, merely becauſe they write on the *popular* and *orthodox* ſide of the queſtion, ſince *the natural* rights of *both parties* are equal. We need not be afraid of the conſequences: for *truth* can never ſuffer by being brought to the moſt *critical teſt* of *impartial reaſon*; and it is the intereſt of mankind that *falſhood* ſhould be detected and expoſed. And as the books which for a few years paſt have been publiſh'd in favour of *Infidelity*, particularly *The Grounds and Reaſons*, &c. have been of *great ſervice* to *Chriſtianity*, by imploying ſeveral excellent pens in its defence, who have ſet the evidence of its divine authority in a clearer and ſtronger light than ever; ſo I make no doubt but that the author of a *late* book, intitled, *Chriſtianity as old as the Creation*, will be the occaſion of ſuch *ſolid* defences of the excellency and advantages of the *Chriſtian* revelation, as will eſtabliſh the *ſincere* and *impartial* more firmly in the belief of it. If the following diſcourſe contributes to this good deſign, it will need no farther apology.

THIS book, the argument of which I propoſe to conſider ſo far as the cauſe of *Chriſtianity* is concern'd in it, is wrote in the main in a *handſome* and *genteel* manner, and therefore, I think, the author deſerves to be treated *civilly*. There are ſeveral excellent things in it, eſpecially upon the head of *natural religion*. And what he has offer'd to ſhew

the miſchievous tendency of *ſuperſtition*, and that the *true religion* has been moſt *abominably* corrupted, by placing it in *inſignificant* ceremonies, and *incomprehenſible* or *otherwiſe uſeleſs* ſpeculations, which have no influence upon *moral goodneſs* but to obſtruct and pervert it, is unanſwerable. But as the *ingenious author* proceeds a great deal farther, and the main drift of his reaſoning ſtrikes directly at the *truth* of *Chriſtianity*, and its *uſefulneſs* as a divine revelation, it will be expected that his arguments upon this head ſhould be fully conſider'd; and he muſt not take it amiſs, if this be done with the ſame freedom which he himſelf has us'd, in conſidering the arguments that are urg'd on the contrary ſide of the queſtion. Let me only obſerve, that the diſpute between us is not all about the *ſupreme* and *immutable excellency* of the *religion* of *nature*, nor whether this, which is by far the *greateſt* and *beſt* part of *Chriſtianity*, be *as old as the creation*, and *as extenſive as human nature*; it is not, whether it be the *chief* deſign of *revelation* to explain and reſtore this *primitive religion* in its original purity and perfection, and to aſſiſt and promote the regular and univerſal practice of it; nor whether *reaſon* be our *ultimate rule* in all our religious inquiries, a *rule* by which *revelation itſelf* muſt be judg'd: for the affirmative in all theſe queſtions is admitted. I ſhall therefore mention them as *allow'd* principles, and no farther than the nature of the argument requires; which may be reduc'd to the following heads.

Chap.

Chap. I. OF the *advantages* of a *revelation*, and particularly of the *Christian*; and of the *use* and *evidence* of *miracles.*

Chap. II. VINDICATING the conduct of *Providence* in not making the *Christian revelation universally known*; and proving that this is consistent with the *perfections* of *God*, and consequently with the notion of its being a *divine revelation.*

Chap. III. SHEWING that we have a *sufficient probability*, even at this distance, of the *authenticness*, *credibility*, and *purity* of the books of the *new testament*; and that the common people are able to judge of the truth and uncorruptedness of a *traditional religion*; with an answer to the arguments drawn from *the change of languages*, the *different use of words*, the *style* and *phrase* of *scripture*, &c. to prove it to be an obscure, perplex'd, and uncertain rule.

Chap. IV. A GENERAL defence of *positive* commands.

Chap. V. A PARTICULAR vindication of the *peculiar positive institutions* of *Christianity.*

UNDER one or other of these heads, I shall have occasion to consider all this author's reasoning, so far as the controversy a-

bout *revelation* is concern'd. But if any part of it ſhall ſeem not to fall in ſo *naturally*, or in *ſuch exact* order as might be wiſh'd, I hope it will be conſider'd, that 'tis very difficult to obſerve *ſtrict order* in remarks upon ſo large a book, in which the ſame things are often repeated; and objections are not urg'd in any *regular* method, but lie ſcatter'd here and there, and mix'd with other things of a *quite different* kind: and that this will obtain the candid reader's excuſe.

CHAP.

CHAP. I.

Of the advantages *of a* revelation, *and particularly of the* Christian; *and of the* use *and* evidence *of* miracles.

I EXPECT it will be suggested here that this part of my design is *needless*, because the author of *Christianity* &c. allows *, "*That when* men do not pay a due regard to "the most perfect religion of *nature*, but mix "with it human inventions, it *may*, then, be "agreeable to the divine goodness to send per-"sons to recall them to a more strict observa-"tion of it." And in another place he says †, "But first, I must premise, that in supposing "an external revelation, I take it for granted, "that there is sufficient evidence of a person "being sent by God to publish it; nay, I "farther own, that this divine person by "living up to what he taught, has set us a "noble example; and that as he was highly "exalted for so doing, so we, if we use our "best endeavours, may expect a suitable re-"ward. This, and every thing of the same "nature, I freely own, which is not incon-"sistent with the law of God being the same, "whether internally, or externally reveal'd."

THESE, it must be own'd, are *large concessions*; but as they do not appear to be re-

* P. 283. † P. 9.

concileable with *other parts* of this author's performance, nor with the *general reaſoning* that runs thro' the whole of it, I think they are not much to be regarded. Very *ingenious* writers are apt ſometimes to contradict themſelves; or to ſay things in order to *diſguiſe* their ſentiments, and as *ſalvoes* to which they may have recourſe, if they ſhould happen to be puſh'd hard in the main argument. And thus the author of *Chriſtianity* &c. has in ſeveral places ſpoken of the *Chriſtian religion*, as if he believ'd and acknowledg'd it to be a *divine revelation*; though it muſt appear to every reader that 'tis impoſſible it ſhould be ſo upon *his principles*, ſince 'tis not a *univerſal* revelation, and contains ſome things in it *merely poſitive*; and conſequently, that by urging *theſe principles* he deſign'd to undermine it, and reduce mankind to the *mere religion* of *reaſon* and *nature*. In like manner, notwithſtanding the paſſages above cited, nothing can be more plain, than that he magnifies the *powers* of *reaſon* with a view to leſſen or deſtroy the *uſe* of *revelation*. But whatever his real deſign was, ſince the generality of his readers will moſt *probably* underſtand him thus, as all that I have met with do; and ſome perhaps may be influenc'd by his arguments, if they are not examin'd, and ſhewn to be *weak* and *inconcluſive*, to think that a revelation was *needleſs*; I look upon this as a *ſufficient apology* for my proceeding in the method I at firſt propos'd, whereby I ſhall have

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an opportunity of doing justice in some measure to this important subject.

Now the *fundamental principles*, upon which our author proceeds, are these. " If " God has given mankind a law, he must have " given them likewise sufficient means of " knowing it; he would, otherwise, have de- " feated his own intent in giving it: since a " law, as far as 'tis unintelligible, ceases to be " a law. If *God*, at all times, *was willing* " *that all men should come to the knowledge of* " *his truth*; his infinite wisdom and power " could at all times find sufficient means, for " making mankind capable of knowing what " his infinite goodness design'd they should " know." —— * " If God never intended " mankind should at any time be without re- " ligion, or have false religions; and there " be but one true religion, which ALL have " been ever bound to believe, and profess; I " can't see any heterodoxy in affirming, that " the means to effect this end of infinite wis- " dom must be as universal and extensive as " the end itself; or that all men, at all times, " must have had sufficient means to discover " whatever God design'd they should know, " and practise."——And " the use of *those fa-* " *culties*, by which men are distinguish'd from " brutes, is the only means they have to dis- " cern whether there is a God; and whether " he concerns himself with human affairs,

* P. 4.

" or

" or has given them any laws; and what " theſe laws are." *

We may, for ought I ſee, allow all this, and yet a *revelation* may be never the leſs *expedient* and *uſeful*. For if we ſuppoſe the utmoſt the *ingenious author* can juſtly expect, namely, that the *reaſon* of mankind is capable of diſcovering all the important principles and precepts of *natural religion*, all thoſe duties they owe to *God* and their *fellow creatures*, or which relate to the right government of their *affections* and *appetites*; and that, in this ſenſe, 'tis *ſufficient* to direct them how to behave in the various circumſtances and relations of human life; all that can be infer'd from hence is, that it *may*, but not that it *certainly will*, produce this deſirable effect. On the contrary, 'tis as plain that it *may not*; but that notwithſtanding their *rational faculties*, men may be ignorant of ſome *great* and *eſſential* branches of *morality*. For *reaſon* can only be ſerviceable to us in directing our *moral* conduct, if it be *cultivated* and *improv'd*; and even *ſelf-evident truths* may be unknown, if they are not *conſider'd* and *attended to*; and much more the principles of *natural religion*, of which the utmoſt that can be ſaid is, that they are capable of *ſtrict demonſtrative* proof, but are not *knowable* by *intuition*; ſo that thoſe faculties " by which we are diſtinguiſh'd from " brutes," and which, † " if they are us'd " after the beſt manner we can, muſt an-

* P. 5. † Ibid.

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" ſwer the end for which God gave them, " and juſtify our conduct," may be ſo *perverted* by vitious and irregular prejudices, that the very men who are thus *dignified* by their *reaſon*, and capable by a *right uſe* of it of forming a true judgment of what is fit and becoming in every circumſtance, may grow *rude* and *wild*, having *very little ſenſe* of the eternal difference of *good* and *evil*, and being *almoſt entirely* govern'd by *animal* inſtincts and paſſions.

THE only thing that can render a revelation abſolutely *uſeleſs* is this, that *reaſon* not only *may*, but *muſt*, bring men to the Knowledge of God's will ; that it is not only a *ſufficient*, but *certain* and *infallible* means to obtain this end. But this is inconſiſtent with their being *free agents*, and fit ſubjects of *moral* government, which *neceſſarily* includes in its idea, that they may *chooſe* whether they will exerciſe their *reaſon*, or not, and by a *neglect* and *abuſe* of it ſink into the moſt groſs and deplorable ignorance. And in ſuch a ſtate of *corruption* as this (which, 'tis poſſible, for the very ſame reaſon that it may happen in any ſingle inſtance, may be *univerſal*) the *advantage* of a *revelation* will be *altogether* as great, as if men were *unavoidably* ignorant of the great truths of *morality*. For how they come to be *out of the way* is not the queſtion, whether it proceeds from a defect in their natural powers, or from want of attention, and not uſing thoſe powers as they ought. In *both caſes* 'tis certain that they *need* to be

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ſet right, and recover'd to a juſt ſenſe of their duty, and happineſs; and that an *external revelation* which rectifies errors their in points of *morality*, the moſt fatal errors that reaſonable creatures can fall into, muſt, whatever we determine concerning the *ſufficiency* of *reaſon*, if *rightly exercis'd*, to have taught them better, be eminently *uſeful*, and an inſtance of *great goodneſs* in the ſupreme governour of the world.

LET us explain this matter a little farther, ſince 'tis of the utmoſt importance, and what the whole diſpute about the *expediency* and *uſefulneſs* of a *revelation* plainly turns upon. Florid declamations upon the *ſufficiency* of *human reaſon* are certainly of very little weight againſt the *general obſervation* of mankind, and undoubted matter of fact. Now 'tis unqueſtionably true in fact, whatever the cauſe of it be, that there is nothing the bulk of mankind are more averſe to, than ſerious thought and conſideration; and nothing in which we are more likely to be diſappointed than if we expect from them, that they will ſet themſelves to *examine* and *reaſon clearly* and *diſtinctly*, even upon ſubjects of the greateſt moment. Their *indolence* makes them take up with commonly receiv'd principles, and ſwallow them *implicitly*; their *paſſions* and *prejudices* prevent their making *impartial* inquiries: and tho they are *reaſonable creatures*, conſtant experience teaches us, that if they are not *taught*, if right and juſt

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ſentiments are not *inculcated* and impreſs'd upon their minds, they are apt to run *wild*, and become a parcel of *uncultivated undiſciplined ſavages*, poſſeſſed indeed of the *powers of reaſon and reflection*, but without *rational* and *well-digeſted notions* of the *fundamental* points of *religion and morality*.

FOR what is it but a *better education*, and *better inſtruction*, that diſtinguiſhes the *politer* parts of the world from the moſt *ignorant* and *barbarous* nations? Have they not ALL ALIKE the *faculty of reaſon?* And yet, notwithſtanding this *common gift* of the great Creator and the improvements it is capable of, in *ſome countries*, knowledge and civility, juſt notions of God, of human nature, and of the eternal and immutable diſtinction of good and evil, prevail; while *others* are overrun with darkneſs and prejudice, and there is ſcarce any difference, but in the *outward form*, between *men* and *brutes*. We ſee plainly, that in *every* age, and in *all* parts of the world, the common people have fallen in with the *eſtabliſhed* religion, however abſurd and extravagant; and that they have always been *tenacious* of the principles inſtill'd into them in their education, whether right or wrong. In *Heathen* nations at this day, the *moſt monſtrous* ſuperſtition and idolatry is practiſed withthe greateſt reverence and zeal; and in *Popiſh* countries, the *worſt* corruptions of *Chriſtianity*, and even of *natural religion*, are embraced and contended for, as the *only ſcheme*

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of belief and practice that can render men acceptable to God. The people never once *ſuſpect*, that 'tis ſo much as *poſſible* any part of their religion may be falſe; but, on the contrary, ſeem to believe, that 'tis a *ſin* to entertain any doubts about it: which makes their errors in a manner *invincible*. Nay, does not our author himſelf *allow*, that mankind are very apt to be impos'd upon, and that notwithſtanding the *boaſted ſufficiency* and *perfection* of their reaſon, they are *eaſily* betrayed into the moſt ridiculous and hurtful ſuperſtition, and into a *belief* of, and *bigotted attachment* to, ſuch principles, as undermine the foundations of religion and virtue?

THIS *ſtupidity*, and *implicit* ſubmiſſion of the underſtanding in religious matters, is not the peculiar *foible* of the preſent age, but was moſt notorious when *Chriſtianity* was firſt publiſhed to the world. The ſentiments and practices of mankind were both very depraved, and the corruption was almoſt *univerſal*. Idolatry, one ſmall nation only excepted, and they *deſpis'd* and *hated* by the reſt, overſpread the face of the *whole* earth. The common people, *every where*, entertained the moſt unworthy and diſhonourable notions of their Gods. The *Jews* repreſented the almighty and gracious Creator of all things, who has a kind and benevolent regard to the *whole* rational creation, as *confining* his favour to them alone, and *overlooking*, *abandoning*, *and devoting to deſtruction* all mankind beſides; which made

made them *narrow* and *selfish*, *conceited* of their own superior priviledges, and *insolent* and *cruel* to all who were not of their *religion*, And the *poetic theology* of the *Heathens*, which seems to have been their *establish'd religion*, and the general belief of the *vulgar*, imputed to their Deities the grossest impurities, and most infamous immoralities, such as *murders*, *rapes*, *incests*, and other the most *black* and *monstrous* crimes; which had a natural tendency to *corrupt* the manners of their worshippers, and gave a *sanction* to the worst of vices. And accordingly in the *politest* nations, some of the *sacred rites*, which were solemnized in honour of the Gods, were so abominably *leud* and *bestial*, as to raise the utmost horror in every mind that has a sense of *virtue* or *decency*.

NAY, even a considerable part of that *public-spiritedness*, and *love of their country*, for which they are so highly celebrated, was nothing else but a zeal for their own *particular interest*, in opposition to the *general good* of the world. It was a *rude* and *barbarous* ambition to *aggrandize* themselves by *conquering*, *oppressing*, and *enslaving* other nations. And of consequence, their *fortitude*, *contempt of danger*, and the like, which, in the support of an interest that is *truly honourable*, and in an asserting and defending the *common rights* of mankind, are *great* and *heroic* virtues, becoming the dignity of human nature, being animated by such *base* views, and exerted in so *unjust* a cause, were very *mischievous* qualities, destructive

tive of the true principles of *ſocial* virtue and happineſs. Indeed they *eminently diſtinguiſh'd* themſelves by a noble ardour and zeal for civil liberty *at home*, and by the many brave efforts they made againſt arbitrary and tyrannical ſchemes for enſlaving aad oppreſſing *their own* country; at the ſame time that they were a *faction* againſt the *natural rights* and *liberties* of mankind, and ſpread *ſlavery* and *terror* through the world. But though I would be far from diſparaging this *brave* and *uſeful* ſpirit, I cannot help obſerving, that an attachment to the true intereſts of any *one ſociety*, however excellent in its conſtitution laws and cuſtoms, is but a low attainment, in compariſon of a love to the *whole community of mankind*, and a concern for *univerſal* liberty and happineſs; nay, it may proceed in a great meaſure from *ſelfiſh* principles, the happineſs of particular perſons, of their families and poſterity, being neceſſarily included in that of the ſociety of which they are members; and there is too much reaſonto ſuſpect, that there was *actually* ſomething of this in the caſe of the old *Greeks* and *Romans*, ſince by their *arms* and *conqueſts* they not only violated, in the moſt notorious manner, the law of *diſintereſted* and *univerſal benevolence*, but even the common rules of *juſtice* and *equity*. Many more inſtances might be added of the deplorable *corruption* of religion and morality in the world, before our Saviour's appearance. And,

I MAY ask now, where was that clear light of reason all this while, the *universality* of which, and its *sufficiency*, at *all times*, to direct men in every branch of their duty, is so much insisted upon, in order to represent an *external revelation* as altogether *needless?* Was it not very much *clouded* and *obscured*; and were not the notices it gave vastly *imperfect* and *confus'd*, with respect to the very *fundamental principles* of true piety and virtue?

IT must indeed be owned, that God did not *leave himself* entirely *without witness* in the *Gentile* world; having not only implanted in all the *faculty of reason*, but raised up, at different times, several persons of a more *refin'd genius*, who cultivated their understandings with great care and diligence, saw thro' the idolatry and enthusiasm of the vulgar, and made considerable improvements in the knowledge of morality. But, notwithstanding this, *ignorance* and *superstition* triumphed among the common people, infinitely the greatest part of mankind, without controul. So that the state and circumstances of the world *in general* plainly required the *extraordinary* assistance of a revelation, to recover mankind to the knowledge of the one true God, the maker and governour of the universe, and to just and worthy notions of his perfections and providence; to restore *religion* to its *native* purity and lustre, which was buried, and almost quite lost, under a heap of *absurd and extra-*

vagant rites and ceremonies, many of which were *ſhocking* to modeſty and *ſcandalous* to human nature; and to ſettle *morality*, and the *ſocial virtues themſelves* upon their true and proper foundation.

I THINK it will be but little to the purpoſe to ask here, whether *Philoſophy* was not *ſufficient* to reform the world without the help of a *particular revelation* from heaven? For the ſame may be ſaid of *Philoſophy* as of the *reaſon* of mankind in general, that whatever it was capable of in the *abſtract nature* of the thing, 'tis plain *in fact* it did not anſwer this end. And farther, there was very little reaſon to expect this deſireable effect from it. For very few of the people had either *leiſure* or *inclination* to attend the ſchools of the *Philoſophers*; or if they had, their lectures of morality were not *plain ſimple precepts*, adapted to *vulgar* underſtandings, but ſuch *abſtract reaſonings* as are above the capacity of the generality of mankind: and which, very probably, inſtead of fixing them in *clear* and *diſtinct* principles, would have puzzled and confounded their *natural notions* of good and evil. The greateſt reformation that *Philoſophy* ſeems, *in fact*, to have brought about in the moſt *civiliz'd* nations, was the introducing *wiſer ſchemes* of government, for the preſervation of *outward* order, and the peace of ſociety. But as the moſt excellent laws which were enacted with a view to this, doubtleſs a *truly laudable* deſign, aim'd at nothing farther than

than regulating the *external behaviour*, and did not extend to the *dispositions* of the mind and the *inward principles* of action, nor prescribe rules for the *right government of* the *Passions*, in which *alone* the *essence* of true virtue consists; scarce any thing was *really* done, whatever we allow it possible that *Philosophy* might have done, towards promoting the perfection of mankind, and shewing them their duty, as *reasonable* and *accountable* creatures.

HOWEVER, let us suppose, tho we have no reason in the world to believe that it was really the case, *that the common people actually learn'd from their Philosophers the justest notions of their duty towards their fellow-creatures.* With respect to *religion* they were entirely under the conduct and government of their *Priests*; who enslav'd their understandings to such *enthusiastic* principles, inculcated such *weak* and *impious stories* of their Gods, and imposed so many *ridiculous*, and some such *sensual* and *barbarous*, *rites* in their worship, as having a *direct* tendency to corrupt their manners, must of consequence render their *knowledge of morality*, had it been ever so exact, in a great measure *useless*. With these *fundamental errors in religion*, subversive of all true piety, and of the obligations of *moral virtue*, *Philosophy* did but little concern itself. And yet 'tis undeniable, that *in these points* the bulk of the world most needed a reformation, because their religion gave a *low* and *vicious* turn to their minds, and very much *defac'd*

their *natural conſcience* of good and evil. On the contrary, the *Philoſophers* generally ſpeaking, tho they might *ſecretly* deſpiſe, and laugh at, the *idolatry*, *weakneſs*, and *credulity* of the People, whether for want of *honeſty*, or *courage*, or becauſe they thought it a piece of *ſtate-convenience* and *policy* that the vulgar ſhould be kept *in ignorance*, rather *encourag'd* than attempted to put a ſtop to it, by falling in with the *eſtabliſh'd ſuperſtition*. Thus did their example give a kind of *ſanction* and *authority* to the general corruption; the admirers of their ſuperior wiſdom were *plung'd deeper* into it; and there was *leſs likelihood*, *perhaps*, than if there had never been any *Philoſophers* at all, of their extricating themſelves out of it.

And, not to inſiſt upon their want of *proper authority* to inforce their doctrines, and get them to be receiv'd as *laws binding conſcience*, and *ſtanding unalterable rules* for the conduct of mankind; the *differences* there were amongſt them even with reſpect to *ſome principles* of *morality*; and ſeveral other circumſtances that might be mentioned, which plainly ſhew how utterly *improbable* 'tis, that *Philoſophy*, if left to *itſelf*, would have reform'd the errors and vices of the world; I ſhall only add, that the bulk of mankind, inſtead of being *eſtabliſh'd* in the belief of a *future ſtate*, by the *ſentiments* and *reaſonings* of the *Philoſophers* about it, were more likely to be *unſettled* and loſt *in confuſion*. For the vulgar ſeem to have been the only *firm* and *ſteady believers* of this great article of *natural religion*; while,

while, of the *Philosophers*, some *denied* it, and others *doubted* of it, and the *wisest* and *best* did not think and argue *clearly* and *consistently* upon this important subject: but though they sometimes spoke of a *future immortality* with great *plainness*, and with an *air of confidence*, as a thing of which they were strongly persuaded, they deliver'd themselves at other times with the utmost *hesitation* and *uncertainty*.

INDEED the notions which prevailed among the generality concerning a *future state* of rewards and punishments, being little else but *poetical tales* and *fictions*, design'd rather to amuse and strike the imagination, than to give a rational account of things, were in many respects *childish* and *trifling*. And it was *highly desireable*, for the honour of the divine wisdom, and the greater encouragement of virtue, that such false notions should be rectify'd. But how was this to be done? Surely it could not be by applying to the *uncertain light* of *Philosophy*, and submitting to the direction of such *unstable guides* as had not so much as fix'd *their own* principles, without an *equal*, or perhaps *greater*, inconvenience; because, though they might by their *superior reason* have given the people *juster sentiments* of a *future state*, they would have left them in *doubt* about the thing itself. And from *scepticism* with respect to this great principle of natural religion, and, which is the *direct* consequence of it, *infidelity* (the common people, generally, not being exact enough to distinguish between *doubting*

and *not believing at all)* no good effect could possibly follow: but the *belief* of it, though in some particulars very *idle* and *romantic*, might excite many, *especially* of the lower sort, as far as they had clear notions of their duty, to regard and practise it.

And now in such an *universal* degeneracy when mankind were abandon'd to the *grossest idolatry*, and swallow'd up in ignorance and superstition, and had scarce any *remains* of the true uncorrupted religion of nature; when the powers of *reason* and *Philosophy* were either not employ'd to restore them to their original state, or after they had done their utmost were found to be *ineffectual*; and tho they dispers'd some good notions of *civility*, *order*, and *decency* in outward life, contributed but very little towards regulating the *principles of morality*, and settling *religion* upon its *rational* and *just* foundation; nay, farther, when, all circumstances consider'd, there was *so little likelihood* that a reformation could come from this quarter: I say, in such a state of corruption as this, nothing of which, I am persuaded, has been *exaggerated*, and amplify'd beyond the *truth*, but rather several particulars omitted, that would give us a *stronger idea* of the deplorable condition into which the world was sunk; who, that has any notion of the importance of religion, and its tendency to promote the happiness of mankind, will pretend to say, that a revelation was not *extremely desireable*, and might not be

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of the *greatest advantage?* or that the *Christian revelation* in particular, which made such momentous discoveries, and *discoveries that were so much wanted*, relating to the unity of God, the rational and acceptable method of worshipping him, and the truths of natural religion, which were *so generally* corrupted and darken'd, was not a *singular* instance of God's great goodness to his creatures, and worthy to be receiv'd with the utmost gratitude and thankfulness?

THIS point is so plain, that 'tis almost a shame to enlarge upon it. Let a man speculate ever so finely upon the *natural sufficiency* of reason, will that convince us, when we look abroad into the world, and consider the *folly* and *enthusiasm* that generally abounds, that men may not *in fact* be stupidly ignorant of those things, which it most of all concerns them to know? Will *reason*, if it be not improv'd and cultivated, carry them any farther than *mere sense* and *instinct?* Or is a *capacity* of thinking and considering a probability that they *will* think and consider? Is it an argument that they *do*, in opposition to the unanimous sense of all ages and nations? May not a revelation then, when men have suffer'd their reason to be *perverted*, so that *really*, whatever it might have done, it affords them no light whereby to discover the principles of true religion, be *in all respects* as useful, as if they were *naturally incapable* of forming right notions of their duty without

it? May it not be very *useful*, though it be not *absolutely necessary* to the happiness of mankind? *i. e.* Tho we should allow, that the great governour of the world requires of none to know more, than may *fairly* be expected from persons in their circumstances, and surrounded with their particular difficulties and prejudices, for which all *favourable allowance* will be made; and that their acting up to the light they enjoy, *however imperfect*, is *sufficient* to procure his approbation and favour.

INDEED the author of *Christianity* &c. seems to be of opinion, "that the greatest "part of mankind cannot be in a deplorable "condition for want of a revelation, which "God, out of his infinite wisdom, has not "as yet thought fit to communicate to them; "at least with that evidence as is necessary to "make them believe it *". If it be, because they are capable by their reason of discovering those rules, that are *sufficient for their present and future happiness*, which is the substance of what he has advanc'd in the preceding paragraph, 'tis evident that this will not support the principle which he would build upon it. For notwithstanding this, men may be ignorant of some of the most *essential* branches of natural religion, which without doubt is a very *deplorable condition* for reasonable beings to be in, if they are brought into it by their own negligence and carelessness.

* P. 195.

IT may be said however, that in this case 'tis not owing to the want of a revelation, but to their not exercising their rational faculties aright. Granting this, is their state *ever the less deplorable?* And may not the corruption be *so great*, and *so universal*, as that there may be but *little probability* of their being recover'd out of it without the help of a revelation? which is all that is, or at least that *needs* to be, contended for. And if a revelation may rectify those disorders, which otherwise are likely to continue, and to be more and more establish'd, and by the continuance of which mankind must be in *very unhappy* circumstances; may it not be justly said, that they are in *a deplorable condition for want of a revelation?* The meaning of which expression is plainly no more than this, that they are in such *deplorable* circumstances, that they very much *want* a revelation to set them right; or at most, that 'tis probable they will *remain* in that *deplorable condition*, into which they have involved themselves by their negligence and vice, if God does not vouchsafe them that extraordinary favour. And to suppose the advocates for revelation to mean by a phrase which is fairly capable of another sense, that *the want of a revelation* is the *cause* why any are *in a deplorable condition*, when they constantly ascribe it to *other causes*, such as *the neglect and abuse of reason, prejudice, vicious passions perverting and darkening the understanding*, and the like; and only assign the

the general ignorance and corruption of the world, which all the *refinements of Philosophy* either *could not* or *did not* reform, as a reason why a revelation was *an unspeakable advantage* to it; is *playing with words, and mere cavilling*,

But perhaps the ingenious author may think, that because God requires *no more* of his creatures, than *in proportion* to the light and advantages they enjoy; and will make all the allowances, that can be expected from an infinitely wise and merciful governour, to their *unhappy circumstances*, and the *unavoidable prejudices* they labour under; and "*men* "*of all religions whatever*, if equally sincere, "have the same title to be equally favour'd "by him *;" mankind cannot be in *deplorable circumstances for want of a revelation.* Let us therefore consider the matter a little in this view.

And I can see no manner of reason to doubt but that 'tis possible men may be *sincere*, and yet be ignorant of some which we account *plain*, and which are *essential* principles of natural religion; that in the *Heathen* world, some were *sincere* who practised idolatry; and in *Popish* countries, many of the common people are *very sincere*, notwithstanding their ignorance and superstition; or in other words, that their prejudices are, if not *invincible*,

* *Christianity as old &c. p.* 415.

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considering *the manner of their education*, their *circumstances in the world*, the *influence of example*, *custom*, and the like; such however, as *truly honest well-meaning* men, who design right, and act right in proportion to their knowledge, may be influenced by. If our author allows this, as he must do, or else be so *uncharitable* as to condemn all the ignorant idolatrous and superstitious people that ever lived in the world, as *wilful* corrupters of the light of reason, and consequently in a *hopeless* state; the only question that remains is, whether notwithstanding their *sincerity*, which will *excuse* their ignorance, and recommend them to the favour of God, their condition (though not absolutely wretched and miserable upon the whole, which this author knows was never intended by the most rational advocates for revelation) may not be justly styled *deplorable?* Or in other words, whether, besides its being a thing much to be lamented, that reasonable creatures should reap *little or no advantage* from their reason in the most important points, and fall into such sentiments and practices as are contrary to its *plainest dictates*, and *dishonourable* to human nature, it be not attended with such *real* and *great inconveniencies*, as may render a revelation, that instructs in juster and more useful principles, *very advantageous and serviceable* to them?

And either this must be admitted, or it can be *no advantage at all* to mankind to have *just* apprehensions of the nature and perfections of God,

God, *rational* notions of religion in all its branches, and an *exact* knowledge of the obligations, and true principles, of morality; but it muſt be the ſame thing in *all reſpects* as to its influence upon their happineſs, *provided they are ſincere*, whether they are governed by *enthuſiaſm*, or *true piety*; whether their minds are *improved* by their devotion, or *debaſed*; whether they practiſe their *entire duty* to God and their fellow-creatures, and underſtand the *juſt meaſures* of both, ſo as never to ſuffer them to claſh and interfere with each other, or reſolve the whole of religion into a *blind ſenſeleſs* ſuperſtition, ſetting it above real and ſubſtantial goodneſs, and the immutable rules of virtue; or in ſhort, whether they are ſunk almoſt down to the level of brutes, or think and act in all caſes becoming the dignity of their nature. But will any one take upon him to advance and maintain ſuch a *wild paradox* as this? Can they eſpouſe it with any *conſiſtency*, who profeſs a mighty zeal for the ſimplicity and purity of religion, and make loud outcries againſt the miſchievous conſequences of *ſuperſtition*, and its natural tendency to deſtroy the perfection and true happineſs of mankind? Without doubt, in the opinion of ſuch eſpecially, the *ſuperſtitious* in all ages, whether *ſincere* or *inſincere*, muſt have been in truly *deplorable* circumſtances; and a revelation to diſpel their ignorance, and reſtore to them the original religion of nature, muſt have been *as great* a *bleſſing* as could be confered upon them.

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THE thing that is apt to lead perſons into miſtakes in this matter is their imagining, that becauſe "men of all religions whate-"ver, if equally ſincere, have the ſame title "to be equally favoured by God, they will "be *equally* rewarded, or enjoy an *equal de-*"*gree* of happineſs in the future ſtate." *Equally rewarded* indeed they will be in porportion to the improvements they have made, and the ſervices they have performed; but notwithſtanding this, the *degrees* of their future happineſs may be very *various* and *unequal*. Nay, I think, in the reaſon and equity of the thing, it muſt be ſo: or in other words, we muſt diſtinguiſh between the reward of mens ſincerity which may be equal; and the reward of real uſeful virtue, and actual ſervices, which, at the ſame time, we have the greateſt reaſon to believe, may be very different. For,

1. TWO men may be *equally ſincere*, and yet *moral diſpoſitions* and *habits*, *benevolent diſpoſitions* for inſtance, may be much *ſtronger* and *more perfect* in one, than in the other. They may be improved in the one by a more *large* and *generous education*, a more *clear and exact knowledge* of his duty, and by *juſt* and *amiable* ſentiments of the Deity; and in the other very much obſtructed and limited by unhappy *prejudices*, and the influence of a *blind ſuperſtition*. Nay, falſe notions of religion, and conceiving of God as an *ill-natur'd*, *partial*,

tial, arbitrary, or *inexorable* being (and there are multitudes in the world, of whom, conſidering all circumſtances, it can hardly be expected that they ſhould form better notions) may *corrupt* mens ſenſe of morality to a great degree, and make them *haughty* and *inſolent, moroſe, rigid,* and *unſociable.* And where theſe caſes happen, as I make no doubt they do frequently, if *moral diſpoſitions* are the perfection of human nature, and the only foundation of rational happineſs, the *capacity* for happineſs muſt, in the nature of things, be very different. Stating the matter thus, the different capacity does not *depend on bodily organs,* as the author of *Chriſtianity* &c. inſinuates *, but on the *temper* and *habit* of the mind; which there is no reaſon to ſuppoſe will be altered *in the very inſtant* that men enter upon the ſeparate ſtate; or that thoſe, in whom the *growth* and *improvement* of moral diſpoſitions has in this life, by *accidental* circumſtances only, been greatly obſtructed, will find themſelves *all at once* poſſeſſed of them in the ſame ſtrength and perfection as others, who, enjoying better opportunities and advantages, have cultivated them to the utmoſt.

2. Two perſons may be *equally ſincere,* and yet the ſervices juſtly expected from them may be *vaſtly different.* The one, in proportion to his larger knowledge and higher advantages, is obliged to be more *extenſively uſe-*

* P. 417.

ful, and to exerciſe more care and labour in doing good. And where the *actual ſervices* which men are called to perform are very *unequal*, which may oftentimes ſubject the one to much greater difficulties and inconveniences than the other, can it be ſuppoſed that there will be *a perfect equality* in the reward? At this rate, there is indeed *no reward at all* for the moſt generous ſervices, nor even for the greateſt ſufferings to promote the good of mankind (in which *virtue* may be very far from being *its own reward)* if perſons who have done and ſuffered nothing will be rewarded in the ſame degree, merely for their *equal ſincerity*, and becauſe they would probably have behaved in the ſame manner, if they had been placed in the ſame circumſtances. This principle therefore is a diſcouragement to virtuous actions, as well as a reflection upon the wiſdom, and juſtice of the governour of the world. To which we may add, that moral diſpoſitions and habits, as it is the nature of all habits, are improved and ſtrengthned by *more frequent* opportunities for the exerciſe of them; and, conſequently, the *natural capacity* for happineſs muſt be enlarged in proportion.

3. As thoſe who have a more complete and diſtinct knowledge of their duty will, if they fail in it, be more *ſeverely puniſhed* than others who enjoy leſs light, and fewer advantages for improving in virtue; as this, I ſay, is *right* and *fit*, and a principle of *natural juſtice*;

ſtice; there can no *equal proportion* be obſerved, if upon diſcharging their duty faithfully, they are not intitled to a *higher reward*. Nay, upon the contrary ſuppoſition, the *leſs* we know, not only of revelation but of natural religion, the better. For if we are *ſincere*, and act up to our light, and to what is required of us in our particular circumſtances, *be it ever ſo little*, we are ſure of the *greateſt reward*; and out of all danger of the *additional puniſhment*, that will be inflicted for miſimprovement of ſuperior knowledge.

UPON the whole, therefore, a revelation, by inſtructing men in right notions of religion, and in the whole of their duty, and affording them *better opportunities* and *advantages* for cultivating moral diſpoſitions, for greater uſefulneſs in the world, and conſequently for obtaining *higher degrees* of happineſs hereafter, may be of unſpeakable uſe; and the ignorant and ſuperſtitious, though they will be accepted of God if they are *ſincere*, may juſtly be ſaid to be in *a deplorable condition for want of it*.

IN order to repreſent a revelation as *needleſs* our author proceeds farther, and tells us, * that "had God, from time to time, ſpoke "to all mankind in their ſeveral languages, "and his words had miraculouſly conveyed "the ſame ideas to all perſons; yet he could

* Pag. 27.

"not

" not ſpeak more plainly than he has done by " the things themſelves, and the relation " which reaſon ſheweth there is between " them." But when men do not *attend* to the nature of things, the caſe is very much the ſame as if God had not ſpoke to them at all. And a revelation may certainly be very uſeful to teach them thoſe principles and duties of natural religion, which, notwithſtanding it was in their power to have diſcover'd them, if they had made a *right uſe* of their reaſon, they are *in fact* groſly ignorant of. If one man endeavours to rectify the miſtakes of another in points of morality, muſt ſuch inſtructions be *impertinent*, nay, are they *ever the leſs* neceſſary, becauſe God has ſpoke the ſame truths clearly by the nature of things, though his voice be not heard? A man that does not hear or ſee has as much need of inſtruction, as if he was *naturally* deaf or blind.

BESIDES, when *God ſpeaks to all mankind, and his words miraculouſly convey the ſame ideas to all*, this is giving them an *actual* knowledge of their duty; whereas in the other caſe, there is, at moſt, only a *capacity* to diſcover it; *i. e.* they may know it, or they may not; becauſe their knowledge muſt be entirely the reſult of their own ſtudy, and impartial inquiry. And,

A STANDING *revelation*, though men may indeed pervert it, as well as darken the light of reaſon, and be as ignorant, ſuperſtitious, and degenerate, as if it had never been communicated to them; I ſay, *a ſtanding revelation*, if it be free to the uſe of all, and frequently conſulted, muſt, in the nature of the thing, be *a more probable ſecurity*, with reſpect to the bulk of mankind, againſt groſs errors and corruptions, than the leaving them *altogether* to the direction and conduct of their own reaſon: becauſe it will conſtantly ſupply them with proper thoughts, which is what the common people in all ages have moſt wanted. For though the right exerciſe of their rational faculties may be *ſufficient* to give them juſt notions of God, and of the great eſſential principles of religion; yet this requires more conſideration than they *generally* care for. And experience teaches us, that they make but little of it, when they are left to find out the rules of morality for themſelves. Indolence, want of uſe, and the attention of their minds to the neceſſary buſineſs, and the pleaſures of life, hinder their making any great proficiency; and being inclined, to ſave themſelves the trouble of thinking, to be *implicit* in their belief, they are *eaſily* practiſed upon, and led into the moſt dangerous and hurtful ſuperſtition. All which inconveniences are in a great meaſure provided againſt by a *ſtanding revelation*, which preſcribes a plain, intelligible, and complete rule of morals: ſo that

that if they will but be at the pains to *read it carefully*, which they will be sooner perſuaded to, than to think ſo much as is neceſſary to diſcover every part of it by their own reaſon, the meaneſt may be ſo well acquainted with the perfections of God, and the nature of true religion, as to guard againſt the two extremes, of *irreligion* on the one hand, and *enthuſiaſm* and *ſuperſtition* on the other.

AND whereas it is urged farther, that "ſince 'tis impoſſible in any book, or books, "a particular rule could be given for every "caſe, we muſt even then," *i. e.* upon the ſuppoſition, *that God had ſpoke to all mankind in their ſeveral languages, and his words had miraculouſly conveyed the ſame ideas to all perſons*, "have had recourſe to the light of na- "ture to teach us our duty in moſt caſes; "eſpecially conſidering the numberleſs cir- "cumſtances which attend us, and which, "perpetually varying, may make the ſame "actions, according as men are differently "affected by them, either good or bad *:" this amounts to no more, than that all revelation can do for us, is to lay down the *general principles* and *rules* of conduct in all circumſtances, but that we muſt conſult our reaſon about the application of theſe general rules to *particular caſes*; which is granted, but does not, as every one muſt ſee, in the leaſt affect the

* P. 27.

preſent argument. For a man who has the moſt exact and perfect knowledge of natural religion has only in his mind *general principles*, and not *a particular rule* for every circumſtance that may happen. Theſe general principles *alone* are the eternal and immutable law of nature. And therefore, if our knowledge of natural religion, *i. e.* of the *general rules* to be obſerved in our behaviour towards God, and our fellow-creatures, and in governing our affections and appetites, be a great advantage to us, notwithſtanding we are obliged to the conſtant uſe of our reaſon, in order to judge, with reſpect to *particular actions*, whether or no they *agree* with theſe general rules, for inſtance, whether they are *juſt* or *unjuſt*, *beneficent* or *hurtful*; the knowledge of a revelation that teaches all *the ſame* general principles, which for the moſt part are very eaſily accommodated to circumſtances, muſt be an *equal* advantage. I forbear enlarging, becauſe it would need an apology to ſpend much time upon ſuch objections.

BUT the author of *Chriſtianity* &c. "thinks "it no compliment to external revelation, "though, as he adds, the learned Dr. *Clarke* "deſigned it as the higheſt, to ſay it prevailed, "when the light of nature was in a manner "extinct *." The plain ſenſe of which is, that 'tis *no compliment to external revelation*,

* P. 381.

to

to say it was given at a season when it must be most *useful*, or that God could not *wisely* and *honourably* interpose to reveal his will to mankind, when their notions of natural religion were corrupted and depraved; and consequently that he could never do it at all, since in any other circumstance of the world a revelation is plainly *needless*. Let us however consider the weight of the reason which is assigned for this, *viz.* that "then an irrational "religion might as easily obtain as a rational "one *." Suppose it might, is that an argument that Christianity is not a *rational* religion? If it be not, as every one must see there is not the least shadow of an argument in it, to what purpose is it urged?

THE only question that can affect the *credit* of the Christian revelation is this, whether mankind might not be convinced, upon *rational grounds*, of its truth and excellency, notwithstanding their general corruption and depravity; and that they had in a great measure lost the knowledge of the true religion of nature? If it be shewn, that in such a degenerate state of the world *sufficient evidence* might be given, that Christianity was a religion *most worthy* of God, and calculated to promote the perfection and highest happiness of mankind; of what importance is it to inquire, whether or no it be possible that they might have been prevailed upon to embrace

* P. 381.

an *absurd* and *irrational* religion, if God had permitted evil spirits to work miracles to confirm and establish it? The Christian religion might have been *never the less* of divine authority, though mens corruptions and vicious prejudices had determined them to *reject* it; and an *irrational* religion would not have been *at all* proved to have proceeded from God, though it had been *universally received.* The truth or falshood of any religion cannot be argued therefore from the *opinions* which men happen to entertain concerning it, and does not in the least depend upon their *prejudices*; but is to be judged of only by its own *intrinsic* wisdom and goodness, and its having the proper *external credentials* of a divine revelation. And if notwithstanding their ignorance, superstition, and the false notions they have conceived, men may still be convinced that it has all necessary *external credentials*, and is in every part of it *just*, *wise*, and *rational*; 'tis evident it may prevail *honourably*, whatever deceptions we suppose them liable to, even of the most gross and dangerous nature.

PUT the case that the world is *universally* corrupted; that they have not only lost the knowledge of the one true God, and practise the most *stupid* idolatry, but entertain the most *absurd* and *dishonourable* notions of the Gods whom they worship; that they attribute to their Deities the *weaknesses* and *imperfections* of human nature; and conceive of

them as *unjust*, *arbitrary*, *cruel*, and *revengeful*; pleased and offended with *trifles*; and prefering the *follies* and *extravagancies* of a deluded and *fanciful superstition*, which debases the dignity of human nature, before *solid* and *real goodness*; and that, in consequence of this, their sense of good and evil, and of the principles and obligations of morality, is very much *vitiated* and *darkened*, and they are led to look upon religion as a thing *absolutely distinct* from virtue, and to resolve the whole of it into *ridiculous tricks*, and *idle ceremonies*. It will be *very hard*, if in such deplorable circumstances the great God cannot *honourably* interpose, and by an *extraordinary revelation*, which without doubt is the most *desireable advantage* that can be afforded to his degenerate creatures, recover them to *right sentiments* of their duty and happiness. And it cannot but be the wish of every *generous* mind, that, if possible, some *remedy* might be applied to cure *so great an evil*. Let us consider therefore, whether what every *wise* and *good* man must desire *might be*, *may not be*.

Now when mankind are sunk *thus* low; when they have in a manner *lost* the religion of nature; and those principles which they retain somewhat of are so *perverted*, as to be of very little use to them, and indeed to make it a question, whether they are *any thing better* than no religion at all; an *extraordinary messenger* is sent from God, who works very *great* and *unquestionable miracles*. These *mi-*

racles strike their minds, and convince them that there is something *uncommon* in this person's commission. They both *demand* and *engage their attention* to the doctrine he teaches, and *counterbalance* their *prejudices* in favour of the superstition in which they were educated; so that they are prevailed upon to examine this new religion with *care* and *impartiality*.

MAY not then the doctrines of it, if they are *plain*, *important*, and *useful*, and entirely *agreeable to reason*, approve themselves to the understandings of *rational beings*, how *corrupt* soever their former opinions and principles were? May they not, if they will think, and exercise those *intellectual faculties* with which God hath endued their nature, come to the *knowledge* of the one supreme Creator and Governour of all things, and form *rational* and *worthy* notions of his perfections and providence; and of all the *necessary* branches of true religion, and morality? May they not be *recovered* out of their ignorance and superstition? Or are the reasonable creatures of God, when they have once corrupted the religion of nature, in a *remediless* state? Because they may be deluded and imposed upon, and grow worse and worse; is it *impossible* they should use their reason aright? Because a *false religion* may *easily* be obtruded upon them, while they are under the influence of strong prejudices; ought the *true religion*, of the worth and excellency of which they must be *capable* of being convinced, if their reason be

be any thing more than *an empty name*, and which instructs them in the most useful knowledge, and rectifies their moral disorders, to be *the less respected?* Or because truth and error, if *equally* recommended by *supernatural* operations, or by the *artful* management of a *cunning impostor*, may *equally* prevail; does it follow, that the truth cannot be received upon *rational* evidence; Does this render knowledge and virtue ever the less *worthy* and *honourable*, or ignorance and vice ever the less *infamous* and *hurtful?* Must we therefore confound and destroy the *eternal* and *immutable differences* of things?

'Tis certainly a very great mistake to suppose, that men cannot judge of the truth and divine authority of any particular revelation, unless they have in their minds, *antecedently to its being proposed to their consideration*, *just* and *worthy* notions of God, and of the great principles and duties of natural religion. And yet this sentiment seems to run through our author's whole book. And I expect indeed that it will be asked, how 'tis possible, in the *nature of the thing itself*, that we should *set about determining rationally*, whether a revelation be worthy of God, if we do not know *beforehand* what sort of a being God is; and if instead of conceiving of him as immutably *wise*, *just*, and *good*, we form *false* and *dishonourable* apprehensions even of his *moral character?* Or how we can be capable of knowing whether or no it *agrees* with natural

religion, if, before we begin to examine it, we do not throughly underſtand what natural religion means? And, on the other hand, it may be ſaid, that if we have *already* formed right and becoming conceptions of the perfections of the Deity, and believe what the *religion of nature* teaches concerning our duty to God and our fellow-creatures, and the neceſſary means in order to obtain the perfection and happineſs of our reaſonable nature, without which we cannot judge that any particular ſcheme of reveal'd religion is fit to be received and ſubmitted to, a revelation muſt be *ſuperfluous* and *needleſs*.

I ANSWER, that the *faculty of reaſon* which God hath implanted in mankind, however it may have been *neglected* and *abuſed* in times paſt, will, whenever they begin to exerciſe it aright, enable them to judge of all theſe things. As by means of this, they were capable of diſcovering *at firſt* the being and perfections of God, and that he governs the world with abſolute wiſdom, equity, and goodneſs, and what thoſe duties are which they owe to him, and to one another; they muſt be as *capable*, if they will diveſt themſelves of *prejudice*, and *reaſon impartially*, of rectifying any miſtakes which they may have fallen into about theſe important points. Their noble powers of thinking and reflecting, if they can enable them to find out truth, muſt be *ſufficient*, if they make a right uſe of them, to recover them from error. It matters not whether

whether theyhave hitherto thought *right* or *wrong*, nor indeed whether they have thought *at all*; let them but begin to consider *seriously*, and examine *carefully* and *impartially*, and they must be able to find out all those truths, which as reasonable creatures they are capable of knowing, and which necessarily affect their duty and happiness. They will soon come to form just notions *in general* of a religion that is worthy of God; and consequently be fit to judge, whether any *particular revelation* be worthy of him. And to suppose otherwise, is only to make reason serviceable in forming our *first* sentiments about religion: but if we pervert it, and set out wrong, our errors are *incurable*; and this most excellent and distinguishing gift of the great Creator, which is the highest mark of our dignity above the mere animal world, is render'd *for ever useless*.

THE persons who are in this way of thinking seem to have but *confus'd* ideas, when they speak of mankind as reasonable creatures, capable of discerning the differences of things; and this makes them talk *inconsistently* about it. For instance, when reason is to be *magnified* in order to represent a revelation as *needless*, then it can do *mighty* things; it is *sufficient* to teach men all the principles of natural religion, and the whole of their duty; nay, tho it has been ever so much corrupted and darkened, and men are become ever so *ignorant*, *enthusiastical*, and *superstitious*,

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it is *ſtill* in their power, by the right uſe of their *natural faculties*, to diſcover all abuſes, to rectify all their errors, and attain to juſt and rational notions of religion. But at other times, the quite contrary is maintained with a view to the *ſame* end, to diſcredit and run down revelation, *viz.* that the *mere capacity* of reaſoning does not qualify men to judge whether a religion be rational, and worthy of God; but they muſt *actually* have in their minds, *before* they ſet themſelves to conſider and determine this point, right conceptions of God, and of the laws of reaſon by which revelation is to be tried. This ſhifting of principles, as the *exigency* of the caſe requires, plainly ſhews, that the *greateſt pretenders* to reaſon are not entirely to be depended upon.

'Tis almoſt needleſs, after ſuch *conceſſions* of our adverſaries, however they may upon other occaſions *contradict* themſelves, and after what has been argued already from the nature of the thing itſelf, to add any thing more upon this head; I ſhall, notwithſtanding, purſue the matter a little farther. And in my opinion 'tis ſo far from being *neceſſary*, in order to our judging *rationally* of the truth and goodneſs of a revelation, that we come to the inquiry with juſt ſentiments of God, and of the general nature of true religion; that I very much queſtion whether an *atheiſt* may not, *by means of it*, be convinced even of the being of a God. For tho' a perſon of this charac-

character, having now only the *history* of certain extraordinary and wonderful works performed in confirmation of the Christian religion, may *laugh* at the doctrine of miracles, and look upon the belief of them as *ignorant* and *enthusiastic credulity*; yet I believe, if we consider how much more strongly human nature is wrought upon by *sensible* proofs, than by a *traditional* account of things, we shall make no difficulty of allowing, that 'tis very possible, if he had *this evidence*, he might entertain quite different thoughts of them.

LET us suppose then, that he *actually saw* very great miracles wrought; that he had *opportunities* of examining them carefully; and that he was *fully convinced* upon the most diligent search, that they were above all the *known powers* of nature, and contrary to the *established* course of things, and consequently was sure, not only that they were not *juggling tricks*, but that he was not imposed on by one who knew better than himself the *secret* and *invisible* operations of natural causes: suppose, for example, that he saw a person whom he *knew* to be dead, and who had been buried *several* days, restored to life again, and *conversed* with him for a considerable time together; or heard others, whom he knew to be *wholly illiterate*, speak all of a *sudden*, *easily*, and *fluently*, various languages. I will not take upon me to say, that these things are *impossible* to be accounted for, if there be not an infinite mind, the Creator and Governour of the universe,

verse, or consequently, that they are, *strictly speaking*, a demonstration of the existence of a Deity; but may they not have this effect upon him, to make him *grave* and *considerate?* May he not conclude, upon seeing such *extraordinary* appearances, that 'tis *at least worth his while* to think a little, whether there be a God, and whether there be any thing in religion, or no? The *surprize* and *awe*, with which men are naturally struck at such *great* and *unexpected* events, has a tendency to correct the *levity* of their minds, which leads to an *utter dissipation* of thought, and consequently to *scepticism* and *infidelity* in points of the greatest moment. And when they grow *serious*, and begin to *reason coolly* and *deliberately*, there is no danger of their continuing *Atheists* long: the existence of a supreme and infinite Being, who made and governs the world, being one of the *first truths* the human understanding discovers, and the evidences of *it plain*, and *level* to all capacities. And a little *impartial reflection* will bring men as easily to form right and honourable conceptions of God, *especially* with respect to his moral perfections; and consequently teach them what scheme of religion is most *worthy* of, and *acceptable* to him.

And indeed the truth of all this is *necessarily* supposed by every attempt that is made by wise and rational men, who do not pretend to a *particular commission* from heaven, to reform the errors

errors and vices of the world. The author of *Chriſtianity* &c. for inſtance, lamenting the *ignorance* and *ſuperſtition* in which a great part of mankind are involved, their unworthy notions of God, which tend to *taint* and *deprave* their minds, and groſs *corruptions* of natural religion and morality, in the regular practice of which, both the happineſs of private perſons, and of civil ſocieties, is ſo nearly concerned, has wrote a large book, to recover them from their *enthuſiaſm* and *deluſion* to a *rational piety and virtue.* And muſtthey not, in order to receive any *benefit* from ſo kind and generous a deſign, be capable of judging of every part of it? Muſt they not be able to diſcern, whether the religion he recommends is worthy of God? But *how* ſhall they come to know this? If while they conceive of the Divine Being as *capricious* and *humourſome*, *arbitrary* and *tyrannical*, *unjuſt* and *cruel*, and of religion as a thing that conſiſts in *trifling ceremonies*, and *unintelligible myſteries*, and not in the right government of the paſſions, and the *plain* and *uſeful* duties of a good life, they make theſe *falſe opinions* the ſtandard and rule of their judgement; it is impoſſible they ſhould rectify their miſtakes. And is there no way in which they can be brought to think more juſtly? Without doubt there is, and *muſt* be: otherwiſe, the endeavours of this author and of all others, to inſtruct the ignorant and ſuperſtitious, are *wild* and *fantaſtical.* And what elſe can it be, but the *right uſe* of thoſe powers which God hath given them

them, to *diſtinguiſh* between truth and falſhood; and eſpecially to diſcover *moral truths*, and the principles of *natural religion*, which are of the utmoſt conſequence to their happineſs? As therefore I apprehend, that the author of *Chriſtianity* &c. would have *juſt* reaſon to complain, if any ſhould ſay, "that it was no compliment" to his book to ſuppoſe, that the principles contained in it, however *true* and rational, prevailed amongſt thoſe who had groſly corrupted the great truths and duties of natural religion, and conſequently in whom "the light of nature was in a manner extinct," *i. e.* amongſt thoſe, with a view to whoſe advantage *chiefly* it was wrote; I cannot but think, that there is *equal* ground of complaint, whether of *inadvertency*, or *diſingenuity*, when the *ſame thing* is ſaid, upon the *very ſame account*, concerning the Chriſtian revelation.

THE *ingenious* author will forgive me if I add farther, that an external revelation ſeems much *better calculated* to reform the world in ſuch degenerate circumſtances, than the moſt *judicious* and *accurate* labours of any *private man* whatſoever; for the moſt *excellent human compoſures* may be neglected, or read with careleſſneſs and partiality, for want of ſome *previous recommendation*, that is ſufficient to bear down mens prejudices in favour of a contrary ſcheme. But miracles beſpeak their attention *ſo ſtrongly* to the doctrines of *revelation*, that they ſet themſelves to examine them

them as points of great importance, which they are, in a *particular manner*, called upon to consider. And thus they may *easily* learn those truths by means of a revelation, which otherwise, through indolence preventing *free* and *impartial* consideration; or superstition, a regard to tradition, custom, and the like, *perverting* and *darkening* their minds, they might always have continued *ignorant* of: even the *plainest* and most *useful* truths, which they may be *hinder'd* from discovering by the causes above-mention'd, or others of a like nature; but which, when they are inquired into with *ingenuity* and *candour*, soon gain the *assent* of the understanding.

I SHALL conclude this chapter with a more particular consideration of the *use* of miracles, in answer to this question, *how far* they are an evidence of the truth of any religion, and that the person who teaches it is sent by God? And in my opinion, 'tis not rational to suppose, that miracles *alone*, and apart from *all other considerations*, are an *absolute* and *decisive* proof of the truth and divinity of any revelation, but consider'd with ALL their circumstances; either as they attest a *wise* and *holy* doctrine, a doctrine *worthy* of God, calculated to promote the moral pefection and happiness of mankind, and wisely suited to the condition and necessities of those, for whose use it is *particularly* designed: or else, as they are *friendly* and *beneficent* miracles, and bear upon them the strongest characters of

wiſdom and *goodneſs*, as well as *power*; and conſequently cannot, without the utmoſt abſurdity, and moſt manifeſt contradiction to the nature of things, be look'd upon as the operations of *evil ſpirits*. For,

I. IT cannot, I think, be diſputed, that *ſuperior created* beings may be capable of performing *real* miracles; or in other words, that they may enable a man to do ſuch things as are *above* the *ordinary powers* of human nature, and produce effects by an *inviſible* operation, which vaſtly exceed the natural agency of the *immediate* and *viſible* inſtruments. Again,

II. As we know not what *degrees of power* ſuch ſuperior beings may be poſſeſſed of, nor conſequently the *utmoſt* they are capable of performing, we can have no certain, nor even probable rule, in moſt caſes at leaſt, whereby to diſtinguiſh what operations are *properly Divine*, and what are not ſo. We cannot from the *effects themſelves* conclude that they are wrought by God, becauſe we are not able to ſhew that they are *above the powers* which he has given to other beings; ſo that the making miracles the *ſole* proof of a divine revelation, of which, *by themſelves*, they can be no proof at all, unleſs we have a probability at leaſt, that they ſurpaſs the *skill* and *agency* of all created beings, muſt render their evidence very *uncertain* and *doubtful*. Eſpecially if we conſider farther,

III.

III. THAT as *invisible* beings, superior in power to mankind, may perform *real* miracles, and such as are of the most *astonishing* and *stupendous* kind; we are not sure that God may not, for wise reasons, *permit* this. As the great Creator has fix'd general rules, the wisest and best that could be, for the government of the natural and moral world, tis not likely that he will let any of his creatures alter those rules at *pleasure*, just as it may suit their *humour*, or *malicious* purposes, and whenever they have a mind to *amuse*, *astonish*, or *deceive* those, who are more ignorant and weak than themselves. But shall we presume to say, that he can never allow any thing of this kind, upon *any occasion* whatever? This we cannot take upon us to assert, without knowing all the *possible* ends that may be served by such *permissions*, which, I think, is much more than we can modestly pretend to.

INDEED, we are *certain* of this, from the moral perfections of the Supreme Being, that he will never suffer the *honest* and *impartial* to be *necessarily* deceiv'd, to their detriment and prejudice. But tho this is a *necessary* exception; and may perhaps include in it a great variety of cases; it deserves to be consider'd in general, that the *honest* and *impartial* cannot be thus deceived, if they are not determined by miracles *alone* to give their assent to any doctrine as a Divine revelation, but by the rea-

ſonableneſs and intrinſic excellence of the doctrine itſelf in *conjunction* with miracles. And moreover, that there are ſome *ſuppoſeable caſes* in which, if the reaſon of mankind be exerciſed in the *loweſt degree* that can be expected from *moral* and *accountable* creatures, it will be a ſure and conſtant preſervative from all *dangerous* errors. For inſtance, if a perſon pretends to bring a revelation from heaven, that *directly* recommends and encourages *intemperance*, *injuſtice*, and *cruelty*, and ſuch like moſt notorious and hurtful immoralities; I cannot ſee how any *common man*, who makes the *leaſt uſe* of that underſtanding which God hath given him, can be prevail'd upon to embrace a ſcheme ſo deſtructive of the *plaineſt* obligations of virtue, and of the peace and happineſs of the world, by *ten thouſand miracles*. He has in his power *eaſily* to detect the falſhood of all ſuch doctrines, how pompouſly ſoever they are ſupported. For his reaſon muſt inform him, unleſs he is ſo ſtupid as to deſtroy his *accountableneſs*, or ſo indolent and careleſs as is inconſiſtent with *ſincerity*, that no miracles can prove that to be true, which calls darkneſs light, and *entirely* confounds the neceſſary and immutable difference of moral good and evil; and he muſt *immediately* be convinced, if he will allow himſelf any time for cool reflection, that ſuch miraculous effects ought not to be aſcribed to the power of God, whoſe nature is the moſt *perfect* and *invariable* reaſon, and who cannot contradict himſelf,

ſelf, nor give the leaſt encouragement to vice and impurity. So that if in ſuch *plain caſes*, reaſonable creatures, who have an *eaſy* and *infallible* rule to go by, and of whom, if any thing can be expected, it may *juſtly* be required that they ſhould diſcover the fraud, will notwithſtanding ſuffer themſelves to be deceiv'd, they alone muſt anſwer for the *conſequences:* and it can no more be inconſiſtent with the abſolute perfection of the great Governour of the world to *permit* this, than 'tis for him to permit *any other* inſtance of moral evil.

FROM what has been ſaid it appears, that miracles *alone* do not prove the truth of any religion; becauſe we cannot pretend to ſay of any miraculous effects, *at leaſt* not of moſt of the miracles which are recorded in the old and new teſtament, that they are performable by God *only*; or that the Divine Being may not, upon *ſome occaſions*, permit ſuperior inviſible beings to work very *great* and *aſtoniſhing* miracles; provided he has put it in the power of every *honeſt* and *impartial* inquirer to avoid being *ſeduced* by them into any errors, that are *dangerous* to his virtue and happineſs.

IN truth, miracles, *abſtractly* conſider'd, are only a demonſtration of a *ſuperior power:* but whether they are performed by a *wiſe*, *juſt*, and *benevolent* agent, whether they are the immediate effects of his power who is

the *beſt*, as well as the greateſt, of beings; or, which comes to the ſame, wrought by beings *commiſſion'd* by him; can only be known by the beneficial effects of them, and by the *nature*, *tendency*, and *uſe* of the doctrines, which they are deſigned to confirm. Let us illuſtrate this matter a little farther by an inſtance, by which we ſhall ſee, that what has been urged as the *reaſon* of the thing will, upon a proper trial, be the *conduct* of every thinking and rational man. Would any perſon, if a pretended revelation was brought him in a book that he was not admitted *to look into*, or know any thing of the *contents* of, venture upon it in the *dark*, and promiſe *abſolutely* to embrace it, and regulate his conduct by it, even though the pretender was enabled to perform *real* miracles? Such a behaviour would ſhow the *forwardneſs* of his faith, or rather an *eaſy credulity*; but ſure I am, it could be no proof that his faith was *wiſe* and *rational*. For if the doctrines which this book contains ſhould prove to be unworthy of God, and repugnant to reaſon and virtue (which is a very *ſuppoſeable* circumſtance, the ſcripture itſelf allowing, that *falſe prophets* may work miracles for the ſupport of an *impoſture*) a man muſt be aſhamed of having made ſo *haſty* a concluſion, or abandon all pretenſions to underſtanding and ſincerity. If when he comes to examine it, he finds in it ſuch poſitions as theſe, *that God is not to be reverenced, ſerved, and worſhipped by his creatures; that men are at liberty to indulge themſelves in all the irregularities*

ties of their sensual appetites; *that they may hate, persecute, and destroy one another for religious differences*; if, I say, it contains such principles as these, or *any one* of them, ought he not to reject it with abhorrence, as having much *stronger*, and more *certain*, evidence, that such doctrines are false and absurd, than he can have that any miracles whatever, consider'd *in themselves*, are *Divine?* And must not then that faith be *enthusiastical*, and rise *vastly higher* than the evidence which is the ground and foundation of it, that receives doctrines absolutely, and without deliberating at all about them, upon the testimony of miracles *alone?* Is it not directly contrary to the nature of true religion, which encourages the utmost *freedom of inquiry* into all its principles? Or can any thing give more solid suspicion of *fraud* and *knavish design*, than the restraining this liberty, which is the most valuable privilege of our intelligent nature, and, indeed, without which, our reason is quite *insignificant* and *useless?*

BUT though miracles cannot alter the *nature* of things, prove *falshood* to be *truth*, *virtue* to be *vice*, or *vice virtue*; yet when the doctrines they attest are all agreeable to *reason*, and upon the whole *honourable* to almighty God, and *useful* and *beneficial* to mankind; when they give us the justest notions of his infinite perfections, and of the wisdom and goodness of his moral providence, and are suited to the *circumstances* and *necessities* of

thoſe to whom the revelation is made; they muſt be allowed to have the greateſt weight, and to be ſufficient and ſubſtantial proofs that a religion, which in its whole frame and deſign appears to be worthy of God, is *really* derived from him. For 'tis certainly agreeable to our moſt perfect apprehenſions of the Deity to ſuppoſe, that ſuch a doctrine as this is his *peculiar care*; that he ſhould give it the ſtrongeſt credentials, and impreſs the ſtamp of *his authority* upon it; a doctrine that repreſents his own nature, and eſſential attributes, in the moſt *amiable* and *glorious* light, and is of the *higheſt advantage* to his creatures: and its being ſo worthy, that God ſhould interpoſe in an *extraordinary* way to recommend and enforce it, is a very juſt preſumption, that the miracles which bear teſtimony to it are the effects of *his wiſdom* and *power*; or at leaſt, if they are the operations of other beings, that they are done *by authority* from him.

THIS argument will appear to be of very great force, if we conſider farther, that in any other view of the caſe it is not to be accounted for. For 'tis utterly improbable, that *evil ſpirits*, if they might be permitted to perform ſuch wonderful works, would exert themſelves in the defenſe of *true piety* and *virtue*; and counteract all thoſe meaſures, by which *alone* the kingdom of *darkneſs* and *iniquity* is, or can be, ſupported. The reaſoning of Chriſt upon this head is unanſwerable: *Every king-*

kingdom, divided against itself, is brought to desolation; and every city or house, divided against itself, shall not stand. And if Satan cast out Satan, he is divided against himself; how shall then his kingdom stand?* Besides, to suppose that they employ their superior skill and power to gain credit to a doctrine, which has a direct tendency to promote the *moral rectitude* and *supreme happiness* of human nature, is making them act the part of *benevolent*, *friendly*, and *virtuous* beings; nay, it is indeed attributing to them one of the *highest acts* of goodness we can conceive of, and, consequently, quite destroys their character as *wicked* and *malicious* spirits. And if it be asked, (which is the only refuge left) whether *good spirits* may not think it a *commendable* thing, to attempt the introducing a religion into the world, that is in general so *useful* and *beneficial* to mankind, by such miracles, as will procure it the *appearance* and *credit* of a Divine revelation? I answer, that 'tis hardly conceivable that they would attest a *falsehood*; or that having so high a reverence of the Divine Being, they would, upon *any occasion*, make use of his authority without his express command: because this is an error in *morality* discoverable, I think, even by *human reason*, and consequently what we ought not to suppose such *exalted* beings to be capable of. Besides, we cannot *easily* persuade ourselves, that God would *permit*

* Mat. xii. 25, 26.

this.

this. For if ſuch great miracles as thoſe recorded in the new teſtament, for inſtance, may, by Divine permiſſion, be wrought by *created beings*, to confirm the truth of a doctrine that is upon the whole worthy of God, or, in other words, which, for any thing that appears from reaſon to the contrary, *may be* of *divine original*; (as we cannot conceive of any miracles, which, if theſe are all *poſſible*, may rationally be judged *impoſſible* to a created agency) it will not be in the power of God himſelf to make a revelation, and by *certain credentials*, i. e. ſuch credentials as may be *diſtinguiſhed* from the credentials that other beings may give, demonſtrate the truth of it to the world. But this is a ſuppoſition ſo *abſurd*, that it cannot be admitted ever to happen in the courſe of his moral government; becauſe if we ſhould grant that an external revelation has in all ages of the world *hitherto* been *needleſs*, 'tis poſſible however, that *ſome time hereafter* the circumſtances of mankind may be ſuch, that it may be of the higheſt advantage to them, and, conſequently, that the wiſdom and goodneſs of God may incline him to communicate it.

I EXPECT it will be objected, that if the foregoing account be true, miracles are of *no uſe*. For it may be ſaid, they are allowed to be proofs of a Divine revelation *no farther*, than as the doctrine they bear teſtimony to is worthy of God; and if the doctrine be rational and good, they are altogether *ſuperfluous*,

fluous, because it will recommend itself without them, by its own *intrinsic excellency*, to the unprejudiced reason and judgment of mankind. To this I shall endeavour to give a full and distinct answer. And,

1. I OBSERVE, that miracles are very proper to engage the *attention* of men even to *moral doctrines*. 'Tis indeed true, that these, being all principles and dictates of reason, may prevail by the force of *their own evidence*, without any *external* recommendation; but 'tis as true, that if men will not consider and examine impartially, they will never (so *plain*, *important*, and *useful* as they are) make their way in the world. Now this serious consideration, and deliberate unbiassed inquiry even about the principles of *natural religion*, may in *some circumstances* be very unlikely to happen, in opposition to the strong prejudices of *education*, to *custom*, *general opinion*, *interest*, and other motives, which have the most powerful influence upon mankind, without something to *awaken* and *alarm* the mind. Especially if we add, what universal experience testifies, that prejudices of a *religious* kind, being of all others the most *sacred* and *venerable*, take the fastest hold of us, and are with the utmost difficulty eradicated. If a man, without any thing *uncommon* and *striking* to introduce his attempt of reforming the world, had applied himself either to the *Jews* or *Gentiles*, at the time of our Saviour's appearance; to restore natural religion amongst the

the former to its original purity, when it was very much corrupted and depraved; or to reſcue the latter from their ſuperſtition and idolatry; he would probably have been looked upon as an *impertinent*, *pragmatical*, *buſy* fellow at leaſt, if not puniſhed as a *profane irreligious* perſon, and a *diſturber* of the public peace. But miracles would *at leaſt* gain him an *audience*, and not only convince *wiſe* men that his pretenſions had ſomewhat *extraordinary* in them, and were worthy to be examin'd, but perhaps rouſe the *indolent* and *vicious*. And if they ſerved only to *balance* mens prejudices, and excite them to an *honeſt impartial* inquiry, they muſt certainly be of excellent uſe; becauſe the mind being thus *free* and *diſengaged*, and put upon *conſidering*, a doctrine that was in itſelf rational and good could ſcarce fail of an *honourable* reception; and of being heartily embraced and ſubmitted to. But farther,

2. ALL the parts of a pretended revelation may be worthy of God, and yet the reaſonableneſs and truth of them may not be *alike* evident in *themſelves*. For beſides moral precepts, and *plain unqueſtionable* natural principles, it may contain others, that upon the foot of *mere* reaſon are *uncertain* and *doubtful*, but yet, if firmly eſtabliſh'd, would be very ſtrong motives to virtue; of which kind, I take the doctrine of the *eternity* of future rewards to be. And beſides, there may be in it ſome doctrines that *reaſon alone* could diſcover nothing of; and certain *poſitive inſtitutions* too,

as

as will be hereafter shewn, useful indeed, either in *particular circumstances*, or in *general*, as being *subservient* to the great purposes of morality; but the obligation of which does not arise from the nature of the things *themselves*, but must be resolved into the *will* of the supreme governour and lawgiver. And such doctrines and precepts as these, against which no objection of any weight can be raised, to shew that they are *unworthy* of God to *reveal* or *enjoin*; especially if they belong to a revelation, that, in the *whole scheme* and *design* of it, is most excellent, and completely adapted to promote true goodness; miracles must prove to be *actually* of Divine original. So that they answer these two *great uses*, among others perhaps that might be mentioned, *viz.* to engage the *attention* to moral doctrines, and the principles of natural religion, which, when considered, will *soon* approve themselves to the *rational judgment* of mens minds; and to give a sanction to others, which though *agreeable to*, are not *demonstrable by*, natural reason. They are a good evidence, that what reason informs us *may* be true is *really* true; that a revelation, which, for any thing that appears to the contrary, is worthy of God, proceeds *directly* from him; and make that, which to reason is *obscure* and *doubtful*, *clear* and *certain*.

THIS is all that I think it necessary to offer, concerning the *use* and *evidence* of miracles in *general:* a particular defense of the *credibility* of the miracles related in the *gospel-history* will be attempted in the third chapter.

CHAP. II.

Vindicating the conduct of providence *in not making the* Chriſtian revelation univerſally known; *and proving that this is conſiſtent with the* perfections *of* God, *and conſequently with the notion of its being a* Divine revelation.

IT will be aſked, if a revelation was of ſuch *great uſe* to mankind, as it is repreſented to be in the preceding chapter; why was it not given *ſooner?* why not communicated to ALL? and why is it not *renewed*, as often as groſs ignorance and a corruption of natural religion prevail? The author of *Chriſtianity* &c. puts the queſtion differently thus; "Is it not incumbent on thoſe, who "make any external revelation ſo neceſſary "to the happineſs of all mankind, to ſhew "how it is conſiſtent with the notion of God's "being univerſally benevolent, not to have "reveal'd it to all his children, when all had "equal need of it*?" After which he adds ſeveral other queſtions that might very well have been ſpared, becauſe it will be allowed him, that it "was as eaſy for *God* to have "communicated a *revelation* to all nations,

* P. 196.

"as

" as to any one nation, or person; or in all " languages, as in any one; nay, *that he* " *could* have made all men, for the sake " of this noble end, speak in one and the " same language, and that God *cannot* have " any need at all of language, to let man- " kind know his will *." These things, I say, needed not to have been mentioned, because they are quite *foreign* to the present argument: the matter in debate being only this, whether it be consistent with the *wisdom* and *justice* of God as the moral governour of mankind, and with his *universal benevolence* to his creatures and subjects, to bestow upon *some* the great advantage of a *particular revelation*, and deny it to *others?* I shall endeavour to give a full solution of this difficulty, in which the adversaries of revelation seem to triumph as *unanswerable*. In order to which I observe,

THAT was a revelation *absolutely necessary*, to enable mankind to know and practise what it is their *duty* to know and practise; was it, I say, *in the nature of the thing itself absolutely necessary*, to enable men, *as men*, to know and practise their duty; we might fairly conclude from the *justice*, as well as the wisdom and goodness, of God, that he would afford it to ALL. But this is not the case; the infinitely wise governour of the world requiring nothing of his crea-

* P. 196.

tures,

tures, but what he has given them a *capacity* to perform; the natural conſequence of which is, that every man does his duty, and anſwers the end of that particular ſtation in which he is placed, who acts up to the *light* and *advantages* he enjoys, *whatever* they are. And upon any other principle beſides this of *the abſolute neceſſity of a revelation as above explained*, 'tis, I conceive, impoſſible for us to prove, that God is obliged to give a revelation *at all*, let mankind be *ever* ſo ignorant, and fallen into *ever* ſo corrupt and degenerate a ſtate. The utmoſt we can ſay is, that it would be agreeable to our notions of his moſt perfect goodneſs, and therefore we might perhaps be *tempted to hope* for it; but as there are infinite things of this kind, which we are apt to imagine, would be of great advantage to *particular parts* of the creation, and yet are not granted to them, it muſt be *preſumption* and *conjecture* only, and could not amount to *a probability*.

THE great God eſtabliſh'd *at firſt* ſuch a courſe and order of things with reſpect to mankind, as was moſt worthy his infinite *wiſdom* and *goodneſs*. He made them *rational* and *free* creatures; the neceſſary reſult of which is, that they are capable of *neglecting* and *darkening*, as well as of *exerciſing* and *improving*, that reaſon, which he implanted in them to be the rule of their actions. Suppoſe then, that by *an abuſe of their natural liberty*, they had involved themſelves in deplorable ignorance of the plaineſt principles of morality.

morality. Nay, let us suppose, not only that the most absurd superstition and the grossest corruptions of true piety and virtue had been, for many ages, the *establish'd religion* of a great part of the world; but that the *common people*, having none to instruct them better, and being *strongly prepossessed* in favour of the superstition in which they were educated, and taught that it was the *greatest impiety* to doubt of the sacredness and Divine authority of any part of it, and never meeting with any thing to put them upon *thinking*, and *rouze* them out of their indolence and stupidity, were under the power of *almost invincible* prejudices; and so ignorant even of *moral obligations*, that they practised none of them upon the *true* principles of virtue, but only as *conveniencies* in outward life, and from *a kind of instinct* like that in brute creatures, and consequently no more deserving the name of religion than some actions of *mere animals*. Supposing this, I say, to be the case, whether it has ever actually happen'd in *all the degrees* of it or no, though, I believe, most mens observation will furnish them with some examples *very like* it; will it follow, because they are sunk so low as to be but very little above brutes, so that it may justly be question'd, whether they deserve the character of *moral agents*, or not, (which may be owing more to the unhappy circumstances in which *providence* has placed them, than to any *wilful fault* of their own) that God is *obliged by a re-*

velation to rectify these disorders? I think far from it. For the *original constitution*, notwithstanding these *accidental* defects, was, upon the whole, wise and good; and the great author of nature is no more oblig'd to interpose in an *extraordinary way*, to *alter* and *amend* in such cases as these, than in any other instance of *natural evil*. We see in fact, that there are in the human species many *downright ideots*, who, very probably, were it not for some accidental defect in the *bodily organs*, might think and reason as well as other men. And certainly it must be as consistent with the *wisdom* and *goodness* of God to suffer others to live in *such circumstances*, that they may be almost as ignorant of good and evil, at least as far as rational religion and morality is concern'd, as *ideots*, or *brutes*; and he cannot, strictly speaking, be oblig'd to redress the *one case* any more than the *other*. Nor is it necessary to suppose, if we allow this, that the faculty of reason which he hath given them will be *quite lost*; because they may *hereafter* be placed in better circumstances, in which their reason shall have *a larger scope*, without *any of those difficulties* which now encumber and oppress it. And in the mean while, notwithstanding all the disadvantages they labour under, their happiness, *even in this life*, may be much greater than their misery. And,

If it cannot be proved that God is obliged to give a revelation even to persons who have

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in a manner quite loſt all the advantage of their rational faculties, or to take any *extraordinary* meaſures for their recovery; much leſs can we aſſert this, when a revelation is only wanted to enable them to attain the *higheſt degrees* of that happineſs, of which their nature may in itſelf be capable; and conſequently, though it cannot be denied, that when the world is over-run with ignorance and ſuperſtition, a revelation is extremely deſireable, and might be highly uſeful, this is no argument at all that God *is neceſſarily oblig'd* to communicate it, though it be a reaſon why *he may*.

To apply what has been ſaid to the point we are now conſidering. If God is not obliged to give a revelation *at all*, provided it be not *abſolutely neceſſary* to enable men, *as men*, to know and practiſe their duty, or what he *indiſpenſably* requires of them, notwithſtanding it would be a great advantage to them; the *mere conſideration* of its uſefulneſs, and of their being in deplorable circumſtances for want of it, can be no argument that as a *wiſe*, *juſt*, and infinitely *benevolent* Being, he muſt make it *univerſal*: becauſe what does not prove that he is under an obligation to grant it to ANY, can never prove that he is bound to afford it to ALL. The whole of the controverſy therefore is brought within a very narrow compaſs, and turns upon *this ſingle queſtion*; whether, what God is not obliged to vouchſafe to *any*, he may not com-

municate to ſome, *excluſively* of the reſt; or, in other words, whether he may not beſtow his *favours* upon whom he pleaſes, and in caſes in which *right*, and *ſtrict juſtice* are not at all concern'd, make *a difference* between his creatures very much to the advantage of ſome above others, conſiſtently with *the moſt perfect* wiſdom and goodneſs? Let any man try whether he can make more of it; and whether, if he will not allow that the Divine Being may act thus, he muſt not ſuppoſe, that he is oblig'd to treat ALL exactly in the ſame manner, and to communicate to ALL *preciſely equal degrees* of moral perfection, and *equal capacities* for happineſs.

THE late moſt excellent and learned Dr. *Clarke* had obſerved very judiciouſly, that "as God was not obliged to make all his creatures equal, or to make men angels, or "to endow all men with the ſame capacities and faculties; ſo he was not "bound to make all men capable of the "*ſame degree*, or the *ſame kind* of happineſs; "or to afford all men the very ſame *means* "and *opportunities* of obtaining it†?" But this the author of *Chriſtianity* &c. thinks not to be a ſufficient ſolution of the difficulty. And therefore though he owns, that "infinite variety of creatures, and conſequently "inequality, is neceſſary to ſhew the great

† *Sermons at* Boyle's *Lecture*, *7th edi*. p. 317.

"extent

" extent of the divine goodneſs, which plain-
" ly appears from the beautiful, and well
" formed ſyſtem of the world, and the due
" ſubordination of things, all contrived for
" the happineſs of the whole;" he adds " yet
" ſure, it does not from thence follow, that
" God will not either here, or hereafter, be-
" ſtow on the rational creation all the hap-
" pineſs their nature is capable of; ſince that
" was the end why God gave it them *." Let us ſee whether there is any thing in this, which I think is ſomewhat *obſcurely* expreſs'd, that will deſtroy the force of the learned Dr's reaſoning. And,

IF this writer means no more, by *God's beſtowing on the rational creation*, and particularly on mankind, *all the happineſs their nature is capable of*, than this, that all who are *ſincere* will find favour with God, and be rewarded by him *in proportion* to their improvements, whether the enjoy the advantage of a revelation, or not; or, as he himſelf expreſſes it at the lower end of the ſame page, in the language of ſcripture, that *men are accepted according to what they have, and not according to what they have not:* this is true, but I believe it will be judged to be very little to the purpoſe; becauſe every part of it may be allowed, and yet men may be poſſeſſed in this life, the ſtate of their trial, of *different capacities*, and *advantages* for obtaining happineſs, and

* *P.* 408.

conſequently be rewarded with *proportionably different* and *unequal* degrees of happineſs hereafter. And ſince the ingenious author himſelf allows, that God, for the greater diſplay of his goodneſs, has *very wiſely* created diſtinct orders of intelligent beings, one above another, and conſeqently that there is a very great *inequality* between the ſeveral parts of the moral creation: ſo that even in his opinion it is not, *in the nature of the thing itſelf*, inconſiſtent with his perfect wiſdom, and univerſal unlimited benevolence, to make *at leaſt as great a difference* between his creatures, as can be ſuppoſed to be between ſuch of mankind as enjoy the light of revelation, and others, who, for want of it, are overwhelmed with the groſſeſt ignorance and ſuperſtition; this latter caſe muſt be entirely agreeable to *the wiſeſt exerciſe* of his moral attributes in the government of the world, if there are not ſome circumſtances, *peculiar* to it, that make it otherwiſe; *i. e.* unleſs it be inconſiſtent with the perfections of God to make ſuch a difference among beings called by *one general name*, and partaking of the *ſame common nature*, and not to afford all of them *equal advantages* for obtaining the higheſt degrees of that happineſs, of which their rational nature is in itſelf capable. If this be our author's ſenſe, as perhaps it may, and not that already mentioned, I would ask, how is it proved, ? Nay, how is it poſſible it ſhould be proved, if the *preſent conſtitution* of things be upon the whole wiſe and good (which may fairly be taken for granted in arguing with perſons, who acknowledge

knowledge all the principles of natural religion) when 'tis undeniably *false in fact?*

LET any one of common observation, and knowledge of the world, give himself a little time to consider, and he will find, that men have not only *vastly different capacities* for discovering the obligations of true religion and morality in their utmost extent, but that their *opportunities* and *advantages* are very different. Some not only enjoy greater strength of reason, but are much *more likely*, if their faculties were but *equal*, considering the circumstances in which they are placed, to form right notions about these important points, than others. And if the rectitude of human nature consists in the practice of virtue, do not such enjoy *better means* and *more favourable opportunities* for pursuing their supreme rational perfection and happiness, than those, whose knowledge, and consequently their practice, of natural religion and morality is corrupted and deprav'd by *false* and *dishonourable* notions of God, and by a *low* and *extravagant* superstition? And has it not been shewn, that as they are enabled by their superior advantages to make *greater improvements, more completely* to answer the end of their rational being, and to do *more real good* in the world; and as their larger knowledge, and being furnish'd with clearer and stronger motives, require from them a more *difficult* and *extensive* service; 'tis most suitable to the divine wisdom and justice to suppose, that

they will be rewarded with *higher degrees* of happineſs: and, that if we ſuppoſe the contrary, conſidering that if they do not improve more, and act better, than others, they will be more *ſeverely puniſh'd*, their juſt ſentiments of natural religion, in all the parts of it, muſt be a *misfortune* rather than an advantage, and happy are the *blind* and *ignorant?* 'Tis plain from hence, that God did not deſign all mankind, tho of the ſame ſpecies of beings, for *equal degrees* of happineſs; becauſe they have not the *ſame capacities*, nor the *ſame advantages*, nor an *equal probability* of obtaining the *higheſt*, that their rational nature may be capable of. And why may not the great Governour of the world make the *ſame*, or *a greater*, difference (for I apprehend 'tis impoſſible for us to fix the *preciſe bounds* beyond which he cannot proceed) why may he not, I ſay, make the ſame difference between mankind by a *particular revelation*, granting it to ſome, and denying it to others, as is moſt viſibly and conſtantly made in *the common courſe of his providence?*

THE difficulty appears to me to be *exactly equal* upon the foot of natural religion, as upon the ſuppoſition of a revelation. If it be ſaid, that all who are equally ſincere, and whoſe natural capacities are equal, will be *equally happy* upon the whole, whatever the difference of their particular improvements and ſervices may be, this, I think, has been proved to be *falſe* upon both ſuppoſitions;

ons ; and that they will be rewarded *in proportion* to their improvements, and ſo far in *an equality*, may be *as true*, if there be a revelation, as if men were left entirely to the religion of nature. If it be urged farther, that a revelation vouchſafed only to ſome parts of the world implies, that the great creator has not afforded to all his rational creatures, of the *ſame* rank, *equal* advantages for obtaining that happineſs their reaſonable nature is capable of, which is inconſiſtent with his *impartial juſtice*, and *univerſal goodneſs* : I anſwer, why then has he not done it in the *eſtabliſh'd diſpoſition* and *order* of things? There is evidently a great *inequality* amongſt mankind in this reſpect, which, upon the ſcheme of our adverſaries, cannot be occaſion'd by *a revelation*, but ariſes from the difference of their *natural capacities*, and *the variety* of their circumſtances. And as this difference of natural capacities is the *expreſs will* of the great Creator, and *entirely owing* to him; and this variety of circumſtances, and the influence it has upon opinions and practices, reſults from the *original conſtitution* of things, that was fixed by his wiſdom and power, and conſequently was *foreſeen* and *deſign'd* by him; he is as much accountable for the difference that is made between men in *a natural way*, as for any that is made by *an extraordinary interpoſition*: and what will defend the one muſt *fully* and *effectually* vindicate the other. For we muſt limit the infinite wiſdom of God much more than is becoming beings of ſuch *weak* and *narrow* underſtandings, if we

we preſume to ſay, that it cannot be proper for him to make that difference between his creatures in *an extraordinary way*, which he does make in the *general ſtanding courſe* of nature; and all objections againſt ſuch a method of proceeding, which are only deſigned to ruin the credit of a revelation that is not *univerſal*, *i. e.* in ſhort, to prove that God never gave a revelation to mankind, and are mightily applauded, upon the account of their ſuppoſed ſtrength to gain this *favourite* point; in truth, ſtrike at the perfections and providence of God, and undermine the foundation of *natural religion* itſelf. And 'tis to be hoped, that the perſons who make uſe of them will conſider this, and urge them with more *caution* and *modeſty* at leaſt, if they have really ſuch *a high veneration* of the religion of nature, as they would have the world believe.

I EXPECT it will ſtill be aſk'd, whether, in what view ſoever we conſider a revelation, be it either as *abſolutely neceſſary*, or only as very *uſeful* to mankind, the *ſame reaſons* which could induce the divine Being to give it to ANY, will not hold as ſtrong for vouchſafing it to ALL? I anſwer no: And, I think, I have evidently proved the contrary, by ſhewing that he may, conſiſtently with his perfections, afford a revelation to *ſome* nations, and not to *others*; and that this is conformable to the operations of his providence in *other caſes*. It may as well be aſk'd, whether, if there was any reaſon for his forming

ing beings of *superior intelligence* and *perfection* in the moral world, that reason must not be equally good for his making ALL his rational creatures of the *highest order?* The questions are exactly parallel, and the very same answer will serve for both. In each case it may be urged with *equal* strength, that the thing contended for is the communication of a greater good, and consequently most worthy his *perfect goodness*; that ALL are his creatures, and upon that account 'tis most worthy his *universal* and *impartial goodness*. Or, if it should be said in behalf of the *one*, that "variety of creatures, and consequently "inequality, is necessary to shew the great "extent of the divine goodness, which plainly "appears from the beautiful and well-form'd "system of the world, and the due subordi-"nation of things, all contrived for the hap-"piness of the whole;" I see no reason why we may not say the same in vindication of the *other:* since the wisdom, and greater goodness, of God may, for any thing we can prove to the contrary, be as much display'd in a variety, and consequently inequality, among beings of the *same species* (all whose natural capacities do not in fact appear to be the *same*, though they go by *one* name, and are of the *same* compound frame) as in a variety of creatures of *different orders*. And if God is not obliged *absolutely*, and *in general*, to afford all his creatures equal capacities and advantages for happiness, he cannot be bound to it, merely because they belong to *one particular* species.

ſpecies. For can that *alone* give them a claim to any thing, which they have no ground to expect as the reaſonable creatures of God, and from his *eſſential* wiſdom and goodneſs?

But if any ſhould inquire farther, what *the particular reaſons* were, which inclined the Divine being to grant a revelation to ſome parts of the world, excluſively of others? I chuſe rather to confeſs my ignorance of what I do not underſtand, than to pretend to be able to aſſign them. Thus much however may be ſaid in general, that 'tis very probable they are of the *ſame kind* with thoſe, that determin'd him to appoint ſuch a variety, as it is confeſs'd there is in the rational creation. I may add, that though it be allowed, that the All-perfect Being does not make his *mere will* the rule of his actions, but the *fitneſs* and *propriety* of things; and conſequently that he never acts *arbitrarily*, or without a reaſon; it does by no means follow, that his creatures muſt neceſſarily ſee *the reaſons* of his conduct in *every* inſtance; or that they have a right to *cenſure* whatever they cannot *diſtinctly* account for. Far from it. For the way that we come to know that God is not an *arbitrary* being is not by ſeeing that there is a reaſon in all his actions, which is vaſtly more than the wiſeſt of mortals can pretend to, who are ignorant of the *deſign* and *uſes* of innumerable things, in the conſtitution of nature, and the courſe of providence; but we conclude from thoſe ſurprizing marks of wiſ-

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dom and goodneſs which we can *diſtinctly perceive* in the works of God, and becauſe the more *thoroughly* we underſtand them, we have the more *clear*, *ſtrong* and *undeniable* demonſtration of it, that the great Author and Governour of the univerſe is poſſeſſed of theſe perfections in the moſt *abſolute* and *complete* manner; and, conſequently, that all things are framed and ordered with the ſame *wiſe* and *benevolent* view, though in particulars it does not appear *equally*, and in ſome *not at all*, to our limited underſtandings. Theſe therefore ought never to be confounded as *identical* propoſitions, *viz.* that the Divine being acts *without a reaſon*; and that we *can ſee no reaſon* in a particular conſtitution, or method of acting; becauſe the latter does not in the leaſt infer the former: but, on the contrary, 'tis rational to ſuppoſe, from the *general evidences* of his ſupreme and moſt perfect wiſdom, that for every part of his conduct there is a *good* and *ſufficient reaſon*, tho we may not be able to diſcover *preciſely* what it is. And whether this may not be as fairly urged to vindicate the conduct of providence in not making the Chriſtian religion *univerſally known*, as it is by the defenders of natural religion againſt *Atheiſts*, to anſwer many very important difficulties in the *common courſe* of it, which cannot be *particularly* accounted for; I ſubmit to the judgment of every conſiderate and ingenuous reader.

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THE learned Dr. *Clarke* had intimated, upon principles, in the main, agreeable to thoſe I have advanced, that a revelation could not, " be claim'd and demanded as of juſtice, " for then it muſt have been given in all " ages, and to all nations;" but " rather " wiſh'd for and deſired, as of mercy and " condeſcending goodneſs †." Upon which our author aſks, " Can a Being be denomi- " nated merciful, and good, who is ſo only " to a few; but cruel, and unmerciful to the " reſt * ?". Certainly no: but it has been ſhewn, that the not beſtowing *equal* capacities and advantages upon all, the not affording all mankind the *ſame* opportunities for obtaining the higheſt happineſs, which their rational nature, if it had all *proper helps*, and helps that *ſome enjoy*, might be *capable* of, is not *cruel*, and unmerciful; and moreover, that it is the *true ſtate* of the world, and conſequently muſt be defended upon the foot of *natural religion only*. And I may add, that it is conſiſtent with *impartiality*, ſo far as that is a *real excellency*, and a proper part of the *Divine character*, as well as with *abſolute* and *univerſal* goodneſs. For the *impartiality* of God does not conſiſt in treating all his creatures, even of the ſame ſpecies, *alike*; it does not cramp him in the *free diſtribution* of his favours, in diſpenſing which he may act with what *variety*, and make what *dif-*

† *Sermons at* Boyle's *Lecture*, *7th edit.* p. 315.
* P. 401.

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ference he pleases; but regards *chiefly*, if not *altogether*, the execution of justice; and the most that it supposes is, that God is *equally* desirous that all men should obtain that happiness, which is suitable to their particular *stations*, *capacities*, and *circumstances*; and that in quality of their *governour* and *judge*, he has given them *sufficient* means to know and practise all that he requires from them, and will equally favour and reward the *equally sincere*, whatever be the difference of their *advantages*, in *proportion* to their improvements and services. And what is there in his favouring some nations with the light of revelation, while he leaves others destitute of it, that is in the least inconsistent with this? May not all this, which is the only just and rational sense in which we can conceive of God as a being *necessarily impartial*, be allow'd; nay, is it not *actually* allow'd by the best advocates for revelation?

When therefore the ingenious author goes on for several pages, in a popular declamatory way, to represent *these* as their principles, and particularly as the principles of the learned Dr. *Clarke*, because he had affirmed in the passage above-cited, that, "as God was not "obliged to make all his creatures equal, or "to make men angels, or to endow all men "with the same capacities and faculties; so "he was not bound to make all men capable "of the *same degree*, or the *same kind* of hap-"piness; or to afford all men the very same

"*means*

" *means* and *opportunities* of obtaining it;" to repreſent *theſe*, I ſay, becauſe he had aſſerted this, as his principles, that " God " made ſome people his favourites, without " any conſideration of their merits; and " merely becauſe they believe certain opini- " ons taught in that country, where they " happen to be born; while others, far the " greater number, ſhall, from age to age, " want this favour; not upon the account " of their demerits, but becauſe deſtin'd to " live in places, where God, who always acts " from motives of infinite wiſdom and good- " neſs, thought it beſt to conceal from them " all ſuch opinions *;" and that, " all who " are equally ſincere, are *not* equally accepta- " ble to God †;" and upon this entirely falſe account of them, deſcribes his principles as " inconſiſtent with the character *of God as* a " being of unlimited benevolence, *and with* " *his being no reſpecter of perſons* ‡," and the like; ſuch a conduct may juſtly be complain'd of as *unfair* and *diſingenuous*. And I make no doubt, but that though ſuch *little arts* in controverſy, as the framing ſenſes for our antagoniſts which we can eaſily *harangue* againſt and expoſe, ſenſes, which their words even by *torturing* cannot be made to ſpeak, may be a means of impoſing upon the *vulgar*, and upon *ſuperficial thinkers* who never examine any thing thoroughly, and conſequently, whatever their outward circumſtances may be, are in point

* P. 409. † P. 413. ‡ P. 409, 410, &c.

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of *reason* and *sound judgment*, very little, if any thing, above the rank of the vulgar; wise men, and impartial inquirers after truth, will esteem them to be, what they really are, the *weak* supports of a *feeble* and *tottering cause*, and do the writers the justice they *deserve*.

OUR author observes farther upon this head, that "when God acts as governour of "the *universe*, his laws are alike design'd for "all under his government; that is, all man-"kind: and consequently, what equally "concerns all, must be equally knowable by "all *." If he means, that God cannot, as the *governour of the universe*, afford some men clearer notions of their duty than others, or reveal his will to some parts of the world, and deny that favour to the rest; I need say nothing to it, having already shewn the contrary. God, as the governour of the world, makes a vast *difference* between his creatures; and even the laws of morality are not *equally knowable to all*, great numbers labouring under such difficulties, that their ignorance, even of important branches of natural religion, seems to be almost *invincible*. From whence 'tis plain, that what might be *equally* useful to ALL is not granted to ALL; or, in other words, all have not in one sense *sufficient means* (such means *as are likely to be effectual)* to discover it. But if he means,

* P. 197.

that all are capable of knowing the laws of God, ſo far as the knowledge of them is neceſſary to render them acceptable to him, this is granted; but what doth it prove? Why only, that the knowledge of any particular revelation is not neceſſary to thoſe, to whom that revelation is not given. He adds, "And if the univerſality of a law be the only certain mark of its coming from the governour of mankind; how can we be certain, that, which wants this mark, comes from him †?" *i. e.* if we apply it to the preſent argument, if nothing can be a divine revelation but what is made known *univerſally*, we cannot be *ſure* that any thing which is not made known *univerſally* is a divine revelation; or thus, if a revelation muſt be univerſal, it muſt be univerſal: a moſt certain, and ſelf-evident truth! If this author will be ſo good, inſtead of aſſerting, to prove the premiſes, the conſequence, we allow, will make itſelf.

VERY much to the ſame purpoſe is the following piece of reaſoning, equally *particular*, and *remarkable*: "If God was always "willing, that ALL men ſhould come to the "knowledge of the true religion, and the "Chriſtian religion be the only true and ab"ſolutely perfect religion;——— it follows, "that the *Chriſtian* religion has exiſted from "the beginning; and that God, both then,

† P. 197.

"and

" and *ever since*, has continued to give all " mankind sufficient means to know it; and " that 'tis their duty to know, believe, profess, and practise it*." Here the ingenious author asserts, that *if God was always willing, that all men should come to the knowledge of the true religion*, he must always have given them such *sufficient means to know it*, as made it *their duty to know, believe, profess, and practise it:* so that nothing, but what it has been *the duty of ALL mankind*, in all ages, *to know, believe, profess, and practise*, can, in his opinion, be that *true religion*, which *God was willing that all should come to the knowledge of.* I would ask then, has it been the *duty* of ALL mankind, at all times, and in every part of the world, *to know* all the branches of natural religion? If it has, and he means by their *duty*, what is the most *obvious* and only *intelligible* sense of the word, that God justly requires it of them as *necessary* to procure his acceptance, the consequence will be, that all *idolaters*, all the *superstitious*, and all who ever entertain'd *unworthy* and *dishonourable* thoughts of God, are absolutely debarred the *divine favour*; which, it it be the *charity* of his religion of nature, is with me an insuperable *prejudice* against it, and makes me set the higher value upon *Christianity*, as allowing its professors to entertain more *generous* and *pleasing sentiments* concerning the state of their fellow-creatures. And if it has not been

* P. 4.

the *duty* of mankind, in all ages, and in every part of the world, to know all the branches of natural religion, his meaning can be no more than this, that God has given them *ſufficient means* to know all he requires they *ſhould know:* but as this is nothing *fix'd* and *determinate*, nothing that is *particular* can be inferr'd from it. This, as far as I can collect from other parts of his book, is really our author's ſenſe; and I chuſe the rather to think it ſo, becauſe it is the moſt *candid* interpretation that can be put upon his words.

LET us conſider now, what can be made of his reaſoning upon this foot. "If God "was always willing, that ALL men ſhould "come to the knowledge of the true reli-"gion;" *i. e.* ſhould know all that he requires of them as neceſſary to ſecure his favour, which is no *one entire ſet* of principles, but may be very *various* according to their different capacities, circumſtances, and prejudices; and "the Chriſtian" (which, ſuppoſing it to be nothing elſe but *natural religion revived*, is a *uniform certain* thing, and a great deal more than God *indiſpenſably* requires all to know) "be the only true re-"ligion; it follows, that the Chriſtian re-"ligion has exiſted from the beginning;" or perhaps, that, in all the parts of it, it *hardly ever exiſted* at all; "and that God, both "then, and ever ſince, has, and *has not*, "continued to give all mankind ſufficient "means

" means to know it; and that 'tis, *and 'tis* " *not*, their duty to know, believe, profess, " and practise it." Upon our author's principles, as I apprehend them, sincerity is the only thing that is absolutely insisted on to render men acceptable to God, which does not *necessarily* imply in it the knowledge or practise of all the duties of *natural religion* itself; nor consequently, *that God has given all mankind* such *sufficient means* to discover this *true religion*, as makes it their indispensable *duty to know, believe, profess, and practise it*; but quite the contrary.

ALLOWING however, that *God was always willing, that ALL men should come to the knowledge of the true religion*, i. e. of some *certain* and *determinate* system of principles and duties, the consequence he would draw from it is not in the least just, or natural, nor hardly *intelligible*. For natural religion was that *true religion, which God from the beginning designed for all mankind*, and which, we will grant for the present, it was their duty (having sufficient means in order to that end, *i. e.* such means which, if they were *sincere*, must be effectual) *to know, believe, profess, and practise*; and if it had been known and practised as it ought, it would have been sufficient for their happiness, and a revelation would perhaps have been *needless*. But does it follow from hence, that when this excellent religion was *corrupted*, a revelation might not be of great use; or, that if

God gave a revelation, it muſt be juſt the *religion of nature reſtor'd*; and that not one *poſitive* precept could be added to it, though with a view to be ſubſervient to, and aid and ſtrengthen *moral obligations?* At this rate of inferring, we need not mind what our *premiſes* are, but may *jump at once* to a concluſion. I ſhall ſay no more to this point now, becauſe I ſhall have occaſion to conſider it more largely, when I come to diſcourſe of *poſitive* duties.

CHAP.

CHAP. III.

Shewing, that we have a sufficient probability, *even at this distance, of the* authenticness, credibility, *and* purity *of the books of the* New Testament; *and that the common people are able to judge of the truth, and uncorruptedness of a* traditional religion; *with an answer to the arguments drawn from the* change of languages, *the* different use of words, *the* style *and* phrase *of* scripture, *&c. to prove it to be an obscure, perplex'd, and uncertain rule.*

HAVING proved thus largely, that notwithstanding the *sufficiency* of reason, if *rightly exercised*, to discover all the necessary principles and duties of natural religion, an external revelation may be highly *useful*, when the light of nature is darkned, and ignorance idolatry and superstition have overspread the world, which was undoubtedly the case, when our blessed Saviour appeared to publish his religion; and having fully considered all our author's reasonings upon this head, vindicated the conduct of providence

in not making the Chriſtian revelation *univerſal*; and ſhewn what is the *proper evidence* of the truth and divinity of any particular revelation, and how thoſe, to whom it was given, might be ſatisfied that it really came from God: I proceed to conſider objections of another kind, relating to the proof of it in *after-times*, the method of its *conveyance*, and its authority and uſefulneſs as a *ſtanding rule*. And,

In general, it muſt be own'd, that the evidence, whatever it be, cannot be ſo ſtrong at a *conſiderable diſtance* of time, as it was to thoſe to whom the revelation was *firſt made known*, and who ſaw with *their own eyes* the miracles that were perform'd in confirmation of it; the evidence of *ſenſe* being undoubtedly ſtronger, in the nature of the thing itſelf, than the moſt *unexceptionable tradition*. However, if it can be ſhewn, that we have now all the *probability* that the thing is capable of, and ſuch a *probability*, as always determines the aſſent of rational men in other caſes, and upon which it would be thought very unreaſonable not to act in the *common concerns* of life; every one that reflects muſt think it his intereſt to embrace the Chriſtian doctrine, and not only acts weakly, but runs a great hazard, if he refuſes to be determin'd by probability, merely becauſe 'tis *poſſible* the thing may be otherwiſe, and will not ſubmit to *ſufficient evidence*, becauſe he has not greater than in *caſes of this nature* can be juſtly expected. A man

man may as well resolve to believe nothing upon testimony, nor even the reports of sense, because 'tis possible these may deceive him, and insist upon *strict demonstration* for every thing.

But the author of *Christianity* &c. has thrown together several things, to weaken the probability of the truth of revelation to us *at this distance*, and to persuade the world that no great stress can be laid upon it; and besides, that it is, upon many accounts, a very *obscure* and *uncertain* rule. These I now proceed to examine distinctly, though indeed almost all this part might be trusted to stand without any remarks, if none but persons of thought and judgment were to read it; it being made up (as will appear in the sequel) of general assertions, possibilities, precarious suppositions, some of which the author himself seems to suspect; and which as they cannot conclude against any thing, more than they may conclude against every thing that is a matter of probability only, 'tis hard that an ingenuous writer should give us the trouble to confute.

" If (says he) it be but probable, that God " made any external revelation at all, it can " be but probable, though perhaps not in " in the same degree of probability, that he " made this or that revelation *." This is

* P. 184.

very darkly expreſs'd, becauſe a probability that God has *actually* made a revelation can be nothing elſe but the probability of ſome *particular revelation*; as this therefore is ſo very *inaccurate* and *confuſed*, I cannot apprehend it to be the ingenious author's ſenſe. And it is with me much more than a perhaps, that if it was not antecedently probable, which I ſuppoſe he means, that God would make an *external revelation* (as I have already ſhewn it was not, and *could not* be, this being a matter of pure favour in which the Divine Being is *abſolutely free*) there might be a great probability, that he had *actually made* a revelation. For if a doctrine appear'd in all the parts of it to be worthy of God, and was eſtabliſh'd by unqueſtionable miracles, no man could doubt its being divine, whether he had any *probable expectation* of ſuch an extraordinary interpoſition of providence, or not; unleſs it can be ſhewn, that God is oblig'd to do every thing for his creatures, that will be of great uſe to them, in an *extraordinary* way, if, by accident, they miſs of it in the *natural* and *ordinary*; or that he can beſtow no favour upon them out of the common courſe of things, but what they have a *particular reaſon* to expect. Whereas in truth, its being out of the common and general courſe is an argument, that however they might *wiſh*, and *hope*, and *preſume*, they could have no *probability* that it would happen, if the original conſtitution and frame of things, notwithſtanding the *accidental irregularities* to which

which it is subject, was, upon the whole, *wise* and *good*; which all must allow, who proceed upon the principles of natural religion, and, consequently, it may be taken for granted in the present argument.

But the reason why the probability is so low, that God hath made this, or that, *i. e.* in other words, any particular revelation, is, that "this evidence all pretend to, since, "perhaps, there never was a time or place, "where some external revelation was not "believ'd, and its votaries equally confident, "that theirs was a true revelation; which "shews how easily mankind may in this point "be impos'd on *." Let there have been ever *so many* pretences to a revelation, and let the several pretenders be ever so *positive* and *confident*, may there not be a rule by which it can be judged, whether any *particular revelation* be from God or no? If it be worthy of God, perfective of the rectitude and happiness of human nature, and confirm'd by numerous and undeniable miracles; will not this prove it to be of *divine authority?* And are not men, if they will examine, capable of seeing this proof? The ingenious author seems to argue, as if the truth of a revelation was to be decided by its being *received* and *acknowledged* as such, and the *confident pretensions* of those that embrace it; and upon this foot indeed, *all* must be received, or *none*; and any particular one cannot be more *probable* than

* P. 184.

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the reſt. But let him not *make* arguments for others, and then confute them. If there may be, in *the nature of things* (which is all that is contended for) a probability of the truth of any particular revelation, it may appear as ſtrongly to all who conſider it, let there be ever ſo many *falſe claims*, as if that particular revelation ſtood *ſingle* in its pretenſions.

He adds, " And as there can be no de-
" monſtration of the revelation itſelf, ſo nei-
" ther can there be any of its conveyance to
" poſterity *." If he means *ſtrict demonſtration*, 'tis granted; if only *probability*, which one would judge he intends by the courſe of his reaſoning, it has been already proved, that there may be probable evidence of the *truth* of a revelation; and I ſhall now inquire, whether there may not be the ſame of its *conveyance?* And as what this author has advanc'd upon this head is not in any *regular order*, but ſcatter'd up and down in ſeveral parts of his book, I ſhall endeavour, for the greater *clearneſs*, to reduce it to ſome method; beginning with what he aſſerts concerning probability *in general*, that " the very
" nature of it is ſuch, that were it only left
" to time, even that would wear it quite
" out; at leaſt if it be true, what *Ma-*
" *thematicians* pretend to demonſtrate, *viz.*
" that the probability of facts, depending on
" human teſtimony, muſt gradually leſſen,
" in proportion to the diſtance of time when

* P. 185.

" they

" they were done *.". I need not, I think, concern myſelf with this mathematical calculation, and the rather, becauſe the ingenious author himſelf does not ſeem to be in earneſt when he mentions it, and introduces it as if he had but little dependence upon it; *At leaſt if it be true*, &c. I would only aſk therefore, whether 1700 *years* will, in his opinion, *quite wear out* this probability; or *leſſen* it to ſuch a degree, as that facts related in hiſtories, at that diſtance, are not to be *depended on?* And whether he will readily admit, that this rule ſhall be applied *indifferently* to ALL antient hiſtories? Whether, for inſtance, he has the leaſt doubt about the authenticneſs of *Cæſar*'s *Commentaries*, which were wrote before any of the books of the new teſtament? Nay, whether he doubts of the truth of ſome hiſtories of *greater antiquity?* The putting theſe queſtions would, I am perſuaded, be thought *impertinent* and *ridiculous*, were we not forc'd to it by ſome modern writers, who make it their buſineſs to collect together all they can meet with, in order to furniſh out *a plauſible ſtory* againſt revelation.

THE diſpute is not, whether the probability was not greater to thoſe who were either *contemporaries*, or lived within *a few years* after ſuch antient hiſtories were wrote; but only, whether allowing that it was, we may not

* P. 185.

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have ſuch a degree of probability as is *ſufficient* to determine our aſſent, a probability that may be *depended on*, that removes *all doubt*, and upon which, even *a wiſe man* would venture conſiderably? If ſo, this is ſufficient to juſtify our belief of *Chriſtianity*, and acting accordingly. And for the truth of this, I appeal even to the advocates for natural religion in oppoſition to revelation, who, I make no doubt, will readily allow it, with reſpect to any other books beſides thoſe of the *New Teſtament*; and every man will find, if he conſults what paſſes in his own mind, that he is not diſpos'd to doubt of the *authenticneſs* of any books of equal antiquity with theſe, if they are ſupported by an *univerſal* and *unconteſted* tradition.

INDEED there is a great difference between *oral* tradition, and *written*. Things which depend entirely on the former may be more *eaſily* corrupted, or loſt; facts may loſe ſome of their moſt *material circumſtances*, or be greatly *exaggerated*; and 'tis hardly poſſible, that doctrines ſhould be *exactly* remember'd, and tranſmitted down as they were taught *at firſt*; or men may think it of no importance to ſtick to the *original* words, if they preſerve their general ſenſe, which being to every man juſt as he apprehends it, *falſe comments* may eaſily paſs for the doctrines themſelves; or elſe they may alter *inſenſibly*. But when they are committed to writing, if we can prove, that the books which contain

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an account of them are *authentic*, and the historians persons of sufficient *capacity* for the work they undertook, and of *integrity*; and that such writings are not corrupted so as to *obscure* and *pervert* the general sense and design of the authors, or necessarily to lead us into mistakes in important points; if we can prove this, I say, we may, at this distance, have the *immediate* and *direct* testimony, not only of persons who were able to inform themselves fully of the facts which they relate, but even of *eye-witnesses*; and consequently a *sufficient probability* of the truth of these facts. And unless we allow this, we destroy the credit and use of all the valuable remains of *antient history*. But 'tis scarce possible to be serious upon this argument with men, who cannot themselves *heartily believe* there is any thing in it. Had the same things been said to invalidate the authority of *Tacitus* or *Livy*, these very persons would have made it the subject of their *mirth* and *ridicule*. And they may depend upon it, (and I am persuaded are too *wise* to make the experiment) that if they will but be *honest*, and *true* to their principle, and apply it in the same manner to *common books* of establish'd reputation, which it is not mens *interest* to dispute, as they do to the *gospel-history*, they themselves will meet with the same *just* treatment. In the mean time it is to be hoped, that the impartial world, from a regard to *truth* and *justice* in general, will not fail to shew their dislike of such *absurd reasonings* when

when made uſe of againſt revelation, which in any other caſe they would freely and *unanimouſly* condemn.

AND now, the mere antiquity of the books of the New Teſtament being no argument againſt the probability of the facts related in them, even to us at *this diſtance* of time; nothing remains but to ſhew, that they are *authentic* and *genuine*, and contain a *credible hiſtory*. And I preſume, that if the ſame evidence be produc'd, as paſſes for the authenticneſs and credibility of other books of as *old a date*, it will be allow'd to be ſufficient; ſince 'tis a probability that all readily acquieſce in, where *religion* and *party-intereſt* are out of the queſtion, and that determines the conduct of the wiſeſt, when a higher cannot be had, in the moſt important ſcenes of life.

THE author of *Chriſtianity* &c. ſeems to have a ſtrong ſuſpicion of forgery, and frequently inſinuates it, becauſe we have theſe books "through the hands of men, who not "only in the dark ages of the church, but "even in the beginning, if we may judge by "the number of corrupted paſſages, and "even forg'd books, were capable of any pious "fraud *." Whether the *number of corrupted paſſages* be ſo great as is here intimated, will be conſider'd hereafter; at preſent, 'tis only to

* P. 185.

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my purpose to observe, that there is no *direct evidence* pretended to, that the books of the New Testament were forg'd, but only because something of this kind was done, *a possibility* that it may be so. But what will this prove? Is it so much as the shew of a *just conclusion*, that because some endeavour'd to impose feign'd books upon the world under the name of *Matthew*, or *Paul*, there are none extant which were *really* wrote by them, or that particular books, which were never questioned in any age, are *forg'd?* Wise men are not much influenc'd by *mere possibilities*, because the consequence would be, that they must doubt of almost every thing. And all the effect it can have upon such, in the present case, is, to put them upon using a *prudent caution* that they be not impos'd on; and then, they may have as rational satisfaction that particular books are *authentic* and *genuine*, as they could, if no such forgeries had ever been committed.

For either there can be no proof that *any books* are *genuine* because *some* have been *forg'd*, which will not be said; or else, there must be a *special reason* why if some books are forg'd under the name of a *particular author*, no books under *that name* can be genuine. But how can this affect the credit of a writing under the name of *Paul*, any more than of one under *Cæsar*'s name, if the *positive evidence* of the authenticness of both be equal? If it be said, that the evidence

cannot be equal, becauſe there have been forg'd books under *Paul*'s name, but not under *Cæſar*'s; and this begets a *ſuſpicion* concerning the one, which is not *natural* concerning the other. I anſwer, that the ground of this ſuſpicion, though there be an actual forgery prov'd and detected, is but *a bare poſſibility* that there may be other forgeries, againſt all *hiſtorical evidence*; and this is poſſible with reſpect to *Cæſar*'s writings, as well as St. *Paul*'s.

BUT in truth, the *detection* of ſome forg'd writings under the names of the Apoſtles rather *confirms*, than in the leaſt *weakens*, the authenticneſs of ſuch as were never *queſtion'd*, and againſt which, we cannot find, that any thing *of moment* was ever objected. For cheats diſcover'd had a natural tendency to make men more *cautious* and *wary*; and the importance of the thing itſelf, as it relates to religion, which, in the opinion of all the thinking honeſt part of mankind, is the moſt *ſacred* concern in the world, would make them more upon their *guard*. And 'tis plain, by the inſtances of their diligence and ſucceſs in detecting *ſome frauds*, that as they thought it a thing of great moment not to be impos'd on with reſpect to the *genuine records* of Chriſtianity; they wanted neither *capacity*, nor *inclination*, to diſtinguiſh between thoſe books which were authentic, and thoſe which were not; and to expoſe *counterfeits*. Feign'd writings might *eaſily be diſcover'd* by *ſincere* and

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inquisitive persons, at the time when they were first palm'd upon the world; and if any were so wicked, as to endeavour to make such writings pass for the genuine works of *Apostolic* and *inspir'd* men, 'tis hardly possible they could be *universally* receiv'd, unless we suppose, that all the professors of Christianity were an *ignorant*, *tricking*, *faithless* generation, without either *sense*, or *integrity*; which is in itself so *mean* and *ungenerous* a reflection, if it did not contradict the *best accounts* of history, that every adversary of revelation, who pretends to the character of a *gentleman*, should be asham'd of it.

BESIDES, forgeries were the more likely to be detected, because in the earliest ages there were *different sects* of Christians, who were *spies* upon one another. And I may add, that 'tis extremely difficult to fix any time when such *impostures* could be *safely* attempted. For if books had been forged under the names of the Apostles in their *lifetime*, they themselves would soon have put a stop to the cheat. If *immediately after their decease*, it must have been an easy matter to know, whether such books were authentic, or not. For persons very seldom leave any thing of this kind behind them, without *communicating*, and *giving directions* about it, to some or other of their intimate friends. Nay, when writings were of great importance, and designed for the *general use* of the Christian world, 'tis very probable, that the

authors of them would have declared their intentions *publicly*, that ſo all might be apprized of it; and that they would have been free and open to *every Chriſtian's* peruſal, both for the advantage they might receive from them, and to prevent all *ſuſpicion* of *impoſture*. The hand-writing might be compar'd with other undoubted *originals*; and the *ſtyle*, *ſentiment*, and *ſpirit* of the performance would go a great way towards fixing its real author. Or if he employ'd an *Amanuenſis*, 'tis not to be ſuppoſed (it being contrary to what is practiſed by all mankind in matters of conſequence) but that ſufficient care was taken to convince the world that it was wrote *by his direction:* and no wiſe man would receive it without ſome proper credentials of this kind. That St. *Paul*, in particular, took this method, that ſo the authority of his epiſtles might not be diſputed, is evident from theſe words in his 2d epiſtle to the *Theſſalonians: The ſalutation of* Paul *with my own hand, which is the token in every epiſtle; ſo I write* *. And with reſpect to the epiſtles that go under his name it may be obſerved moreover, that 'tis abſolutely improbable they were forg'd in the time we are now ſpeaking of; becauſe all of them, except thoſe to *Timothy*, *Titus*, and *Philemon*, were directed to very noted churches in *large* and *populous* cities, and conſequently muſt have been heard of and known before his death; or elſe an *appeal* might have been

* *Chap.* iii. 17.

made

made to those churches with the greatest ease, and their declaring that they never receiv'd such epistles, which 'tis natural to think they would do *voluntarily*, whether they were appeal'd to or no, must immediately have *detected* the forgery. And if we remove the fraud to a *farther distance*, it will not at all suit with the evidence we have of the *greater antiquity* of the books of the New Testament, from writings that were extant before any such *supposeable period*, in which they are *expressly* cited. These things I offer not as conclusive proofs, but only as strong presumptions, which, taken altogether, render it far *more probable* than the contrary can be shewn to be, that the books of the New Testament are genuine.

But the probability rises a great deal higher when we consider, that with respect to the far greater part, *viz.* the *four gospels*, the *acts of the apostles*, *thirteen epistles of* Paul, *the first epistle of* Peter, and *the first of* John, we have all the *positive evidence* that the nature of the case will bear. For to prove that they are justly attributed to the persons under whose names we receive them, there is the *universal consent* of antiquity. They were, several of them, quoted as theirs by *contemporaries*, in the very age in which they were wrote, and all in the *immediately succeeding* ages, and have, as far as appears, been constantly acknowledg'd in that character, both by *friends* and *enemies*. And I would ask

now, since no man can pretend to assign any one *internal mark* of forgery, what better evidence we have, nay indeed what higher evidence there can be, in *the nature of the thing*, that *Cicero*, *Julius Cæsar*, or any other Heathen writers, were the authors of those books which go under their names, than such an *universal* and *undisputed tradition*.

But supposing the books of the New Testament to be authentic and genuine, what proof have we that they are a *credible history*? The greatest that can reasonably be desired. For,

1. There is a very strong probability, that the persons who related the extraordinary facts contained in them were not *themselves imposed on*. For of the four evangelists, two *at least*, viz. *Matthew*, and *John*, were *eye-witnesses*; and can any historian record any thing upon better assurance of its truth, than *the evidence of his own senses*? It may be said, that this evidence ought indeed to be admitted with respect to all *common* events, but we must be cautious that we do not trust the senses of others too far in cases that are *supernatural*; because *fanciful* and *enthusiastic* men have, in all ages, been very *credulous* this way, and equally *positive* and *confident*: or else, it could be no great difficulty for a *skilful* person to impose upon such *illiterate rude* people as the Apostles, who were altogether unacquainted with the powers of nature, and

pass

paſs off ſome ſecret, and to them unuſual, operations of *natural cauſes* for *real miracles.*

To which it may be replied in behalf of the two writers above-mention'd, that there is not the leaſt reaſon beſides their belief of the miracles related in their hiſtory, (and to give this as reaſon is taking the very thing in diſpute *for granted)* to charge them with *credulity* and *enthuſiaſm*; and that the apoſtles in general are very much injur'd, when they are repreſented as perſons *groſly ignorant*; which has been carried too far even by ſome who have wrote excellent defences of Chriſtianity, in order to render the propagation of the goſpel, by ſuch inſtruments, the more *ſurprizing* and *marvellous.* For let any man read *Paul*'s defences of himſelf recorded in the *Acts of the Apoſtles*, and his epiſtles, and he will find ſuch a knowledge of mankind, ſuch an artful genteel and happy addreſs, as argue the author to have ſtudied human nature *carefully*, and made the *wiſeſt* obſervations upon it, together with ſuch *acuteneſs* and *ſtrength* of reaſoning, as few writers can pretend to. Nay, let him read the epiſtle of *James*, one of the *illiterate* apoſtles, (of the authenticneſs of which I can ſee no juſt ground to doubt, for reaſons which will be mentioned when I come to ſpeak of the controverted books) and even there he will meet with ſuch *judicious* moral reflections, ſuch a *propriety*, beauty, and *elevation* of thought,

as are very much above the capacity of the *fiſhermen* and *mechanics* of this age, and the fartheſt that can be from *the ſtrain of an enthuſiaſt.*

AGAIN, ſeveral of our Saviour's miracles were of ſuch a nature, as cannot be ſuppoſed to have been merely *imaginary*, and in which the moſt *enthuſiaſtical* could not well be deceiv'd, ſuch as *curing inveterate diſtempers by a word*, *raiſing the dead*, &c. and are evidently above all the *known* powers and laws of nature.

BUT let us conſider the caſe more particularly with reſpect to the *reſurrection* of Chriſt, which, together with its conſequences, is the chief ſtrength of the Chriſtian cauſe; and if it be once prov'd, confirms the reality of all the miracles ſaid to be perform'd by him *in his life-time*, and conſequently all the preceding parts of the goſpel-hiſtory. Now 'tis plain, that the Apoſtles at their maſter's death thought all their hopes were loſt, and did not *expect* his reſurrection; and when they receiv'd the firſt report of it, were not forward to *believe* it: nay, one of them, *viz. Thomas*, (as is atteſted by an eye-witneſs *) was ſo *ſcrupulous*, as to inſiſt upon the niceſt ſcrutiny, and the ſtricteſt proof that the moſt prudent and cautious of our *modern unbelievers* could be tempted to

* John xx. 25.

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desire; for he would not believe, till by handling the wounds made in our Lord's crucified body he was convinc'd that there was a *real resurrection*, and that his senses were not impos'd upon by an airy *phantom*: so that 'tis utterly improbable that they were deceiv'd by a too *hasty credulity*. And besides, they had such a *perfect remembrance* of their master's person, with whom they had conversed intimately for several years, that they could not take another for him; or if this was possible, had he only made them *one*, and that a *short* and *transient* visit, it could not be the case, as the circumstances of the fact are related; for he not only submitted to be *felt* and *examin'd*, but to give them the greatest security imaginable against a *fraud*, appear'd to them *often*, and tarried a *considerable time*, *eat*, and *drink*, and convers'd freely with them, for the space of *forty days*; and if all these things might be transacted in a kind of *dream*, and be nothing but the *reveries* of a distemper'd imagination, 'twill be impossible for any man to prove that he is ever *thoroughly awake*. And since the charge of *credulity* and *enthusiasm* fails, will the most confident opposers of revelation take upon them to say, that this resurrection was not a *true* and *proper miracle?*

Let me add farther, that with respect to the *miraculous gifts* of the Holy Ghost, we have the accounts from *Luke* in the acts of the apostles, and *Paul* in his epistles, who were

were both not only *eye-witneſſes*, but the very perſons *poſſeſs'd* of theſe *extraordinary powers*. And the nature of the thing itſelf (as to ſome of theſe powers at leaſt) happens to be ſuch, as will not admit of a *deception*. For the *weakeſt enthuſiaſt* may know (for inſtance) as certainly, and without a poſſibility of being impos'd on, whether he is enabled, *all of a ſudden*, to ſpeak languages he never learn'd *intelligibly*, and *eaſily*; he may, I ſay, as certainly know this, as the *wiſeſt* and *ſobereſt reaſoner*, and the *greateſt philoſopher*, that ever liv'd.

ALL this, it may be ſaid, only proves, that theſe writers were not themſelves impos'd on, in the accounts they have given us of the miracles by which Chriſtianity was confirm'd; but what probability have we that they have made a juſt relation of our *Saviour's diſcourſes*, and conſequently of the ſubſtance of the *Chriſtian Doctrine?* Why in this, they teſtified only of what they *heard*, as in the other caſe, of what they *ſaw*. To theſe diſcourſes 'tis very likely they gave the utmoſt *attention*, and heard them for the main *frequently repeated*; by which means they would make the *deeper impreſſion* upon their minds, and be more *eaſily* remember'd. And if the hiſtory of the miracles be true, there is no difficulty at all in ſuppoſing, that where their *memories fail'd*, they were *extraordinarily* aſſiſted in recollecting the ſermons and parables of Chriſt, ſo far as was *neceſſary* to give

give a *complete view* of his religion, and enable them to teach and publish the *same doctrine* after his decease. Let us therefore, having briefly consider'd the capacity of the gospel-historians to be perfectly inform'd of all the facts which they relate, proceed to examine.

2. WHAT may be said for their *integrity*, or in other words what probability there is, that as they were not *deceiv'd themselves*, they would not *impose on others*; by which we shall establish, beyond all just exception, the *truth* of their history. And if we look into the history itself, we find an air of *honesty* and *impartiality* running thro' the whole of it. The great design of it, in all its parts, is to recommend the strictest *truth* and *fidelity*, and, in general, the noblest perfection of *virtue* and *true goodness*. The writers punctually relate not only such things as redounded to their master's *honour*, but several other circumstances, which in the opinion of the world, and according to vulgar prejudices, had a quite *different aspect*, such as the *obscurity* and *meanness* of his birth and parentage, his *low despicable* condition in life, and the like; and are very particular in recounting their *own failings* with all their aggravations, their *ignorance* and *dullness of apprehension*, their *cowardice* in deserting their master, and *Peter's absolute denial* of him with horrid oaths and imprecations. This is very much like the *artless simplicity* of upright and

diſintereſted men. But as 'tis poſſible it might be *put on*, to procure themſelves the reputation of *well-meaning* and *credible* hiſtorians, I ſhall lay no more ſtreſs upon it than it deſerves; and conſider it not as direct proof, but as a circumſtance that *looks well*, and, in conjunction with others, muſt have its weight. Let us inquire therefore what was their *general* character. And,

It appears from all accounts, that they were perſons of ſtrict and exemplary virtue, againſt the integrity of whoſe conduct *upon the whole*, nothing of moment was ever urg'd by the moſt malicious enemies of Chriſtianity, which certainly gives great ſtrength to their teſtimony. And the force of this argument is very much increas'd by obſerving, that they could have no *worldly intereſt* to promote by publiſhing ſuch falſe accounts. They had no proſpect of honour to allure their *ambition*, nor of riches to gratify their *covetouſneſs*, nor of eaſe and pleaſure to ſuit a taſte for *indolence* and *luxury*; but on the contrary, were oblig'd to practiſe *humility*, *mortification*, and *ſelf-denial*, and the *appearance* of every virtue, which could not but be a very uneaſy reſtraint to men of *corrupt* and *vicious* minds; and as their doctrine overturn'd the forms of religion that were eſtabliſh'd in *all Nations*, and contradicted the general *prejudices* and *vices* of the world, they were ſure of reproaches and ſufferings; (not only as the *probable conſequences* of their perſiſting

ſiſting to declare the Chriſtian doctrine, but conſequences of which their maſter had *expreſly* forewarn'd them) all which they unanimouſly, courageouſly, and chearfully endur'd, and gave the *higheſt proof* of an *inflexible honeſty*, by dying to vindicate the truth of their teſtimony.

I DO not ſuppoſe, that mens ſuffering, or even dying, in defence of any particular religion is *in itſelf* an argument of the *truth* of it; but 'tis the ſtrongeſt probability in the world that they *believe* it to be *true*. For to ſuppoſe ſeveral perſons to have enter'd into a *confederacy* to loſe their all, and expoſe themſelves to contempt, loſs of liberty, torments and death, for the ſake of atteſting what they *knew* to be a *falſhood*, from which therefore they could expect no poſſible advantage in *another life* to recompenſe their miſeries here; to ſuppoſe them, I ſay, not to be puſh'd on by the heat of a *falſe religious enthuſiaſm*, but to be *deliberate*, *cool*, and *inflexible* in ſuch a purpoſe as this; and conſequently to have entirely extinguiſhed that love of eaſe, and averſion to pain and miſery, which are ſo *ſtrong* and *univerſal* in human nature; is ſuppoſing both againſt its *reaſon* and *paſſions*, and againſt the common *experience* and *obſervation* of mankind. And in the preſent caſe, if the Apoſtles *themſelves believ'd* the extraordinary facts which they have related, they muſt have been *true*; becauſe the circumſtances that attended them have been

been ſhewn to be ſuch, that they could not be impos'd upon.

If, therefore, it be not *unſuitable* to our wiſeſt notions of the ſupreme Being, to ſuppoſe him to take compaſſion on the *ignorance* and *corruption* of his reaſonable creatures, and make *at any time* an extraordinary revelation of his mind and will; if ſuch a revelation was highly for the advantage of mankind in their *corrupt* and *degenerate* circumſtances; and if the *Chriſtian* doctrine (as it is convey'd down to us in the writings of thoſe who heard it from Chriſt himſelf, and were appointed to publiſh it throughout the world) be in all reſpects *worthy of God*, and conſequently worthy *actually to be* this revelation; the contrary to which has never yet been prov'd by the moſt *learned* and *judicious* of its adverſaries; we are certainly under the ſtrongeſt obligations to believe the miraculous facts by which it is ſupported, upon the *credible teſtimony* above-mention'd. For in no caſe that depends upon teſtimony can we have ſtronger evidence of the truth of a fact than this, that 'tis related by *eye-witneſſes*, or *actors* in it, and perſons of *eſtabliſh'd veracity*. And if we refuſe to admit it upon ſuch evidence, when there is nothing in the *abſtract nature* of the thing itſelf to invalidate their teſtimony, we deſtroy the credibility of all *antient hiſtories*, and can indeed believe nothing upon *tradition* or *teſtimony*, nothing but what is ſubjected to our own *ſenſes*.

Nay

NAY farther, as the ingenious Dr. *Ibbot* has very justly observed, * Since " the ac- " counts which the Evangelists have given " us in their writings, are of things which " they saw, and heard themselves, or had " from those who did so;" since " they lived " in the time and place, when and where " the things which they write of were pub- " lickly transacted; their writings deserve " greater credit than any other writings what- " ever. For how few of those things, re- " lated by other historians, are such as they " themselves were present at, and saw? 'Tis " needless to mention *Herodotus*, *Diodorus* " *Siculus*, *Livy*, *Suetonius*, *Curtius*, and o- " ther historians who have given us an ac- " count of the *Assyrian* or *Persian*, the *Greek* " or *Roman* affairs; and who have wrote of " things that were done many ages before " they were born, and in such parts of the " world as were very remote from their own " habitations. I shall only instance in one " writer, and that is *Cornelius Tacitus*, in " that part of his history, where he is giving " an account of the destruction of *Jerusalem*, " and takes occasion to tell us the whole " story of the city and people of the *Jews* " from their first beginning. 'Tis scarce " credible how many groundless and childish " tales, what stupid and evidently false ac- " counts that celebrated historian has heap'd

* *Sermons at* Boyle's *Lecture*, p. 97.

" toge-

" together, and which he might eaſily have " known to be ſuch even in *Rome* itſelf where " he liv'd, from the great numbers of *Jews* " of all ſorts and ranks which reſorted thi- " ther, and eſpecially from the hiſtory of " *Joſephus*, which was then in being, and at " the emperor's command was repoſited in " the publick library."

THUS we have ſeen, that 'tis *highly probable* the *firſt propagators* of the Chriſtian revelation were not impos'd on themſelves, and did not deſign to impoſe on others. The author of *Chriſtianity* &c. ſuppoſes, that " we ought to be certain, that they could " not be impos'd on themſelves, and would " not impoſe on others; or in other words, " were infallible and impeccable *." But, (1.) I don't ſee how *abſolute infallibility* can be neceſſary in order to their giving ſuch a credible teſtimony as no rational man can doubt of; for none of the reports of *ſenſe* are, ſtrictly ſpeaking, infallible. Is not therefore the teſtimony of *eye-witneſſes*, if we are ſatisfied they actually ſaw the things they relate, ſufficient evidence in any caſe? Shall we reject a *probability* that they *were not* deceiv'd, which in affairs of the greateſt moment 'tis reckon'd madneſs to diſpute, only becauſe 'tis *poſſible they might?* Men can no more doubt of many things for which they have only *probable* evidence, than they could

* P. 213.

if

if they had the moſt *certain* and *infallible* demonſtration. Indeed, what is it but *probability* that is the great ſpring of human actions, and determines our moſt important perſuits? What but a *credible teſtimony*, a teſtimony not ſtrictly *infallible*, that decides in all courts of judicature, where our moſt valuable properties, and even life itſelf, are concern'd? Is it not then ſufficient to eſtabliſh the credibility of the goſpel hiſtorians, that the accounts they give are of things which they *ſaw*, and *heard*; and that to ſuppoſe they were impos'd on renders the evidence of *ſenſe itſelf* uncertain and precarious? Or, muſt we inſiſt, *in this caſe alone*, not only upon a good probability that they were not, but an abſolute impoſſibility that they ſhould be deceiv'd? Nothing can be more *perverſe* and *unreaſonable*. Again,

WHY muſt it be thought neceſſary, to make their teſtimony credible, that they ſhould be *impeccable?* As without their being ſtrictly *infallible*, we may have the higheſt probability that they *were not deceiv'd*; ſo, without ſuppoſing they were *impeccable*, we may have ſufficient aſſurance of their *honeſty*. Where is the man in the world that is *impeccable?* But is no man therefore to be *believ'd?* May we not be firmly perſuaded, upon good grounds, that he has too much *virtue* and *generoſity* to deceive us, without knowing that he *cannot?* And would it not be a very ſtrange conduct, if men of *approv'd inte-*

grity were not *credited*, even in caſes upon which the happineſs of life depends, only for wanting a character that is too perfect for human nature in the *preſent ſtate?* Muſt not, at this rate, all the *buſineſs* and *commerce* of mankind, all *mutual confidence*, and intercourſe of *good offices* be ſuſpended, and every one ſtand *ſingle* and *helpleſs* in the midſt of ſociety? Nay, muſt not ſocieties *disband*, which we are ſure can never be ſupported while there is univerſal *jealouſy* and *diſtruſt?* And let but the *ſame credit* be given to the teſtimony of the Apoſtles, of whom it has been prov'd that they were perſons of great ſincerity and virtue, as is conſtantly allow'd to the teſtimony of *honeſt unexceptionable witneſſes* in courts of judicature, and in all concerns of human life, and we muſt admit the *truth* of their hiſtory. For men have not the leaſt doubt of things which are thus atteſted, if they are not in themſelves *incredible*; they negotiate affairs, and run hazards upon ſuch a *probability*; and therefore if they were fair and impartial, they would not ſcruple to believe *Chriſtianity* upon the ſame evidence, and would act as that belief directs.

But our author proceeds farther, and advances ſome things which are more immediately to the purpoſe of the preſent argument, as they directly attack the *integrity* of the goſpel-hiſtorians. Theſe therefore I ſhall particularly conſider, not for any ſtrength that I apprehend to be in the ob-

jections

jections themselves, or because I have so mean an opinion of this writer's good sense as to imagine, that *he himself believes* there is any great weight in them, but that nothing *plausible* may so much as *seem* to lie against the truth of their testimony. 'Tis needless to insist largely upon what he urges, from our Saviour's saying to those, who *had propheſied, and cast out devils in his name, Depart from me ye that work iniquity* *, *viz.* " that nei-" ther prophecies, nor miracles are absolute " securities for men to depend on †," because it may be granted they are not, if the doctrine that is taught be not in itself rational, and worthy of God. And as prophecies and miracles were only designed to attest the *truth* of the doctrine, and not the *honesty* and *virtue* of the persons that preach'd it, nothing can be inferr'd from hence that is a real prejudice to Christianity; especially if we suppose, what was undeniably true with respect to *Judas*, as long as he had the power, which this author speaks of, " of doing mi-" racles, even to the *raising* of the dead ‡," that they were not *openly* and *scandalously* immoral; and, consequently, that their vices could not bring *a dishonour* upon the religion they propagated. Besides, how does this in the least affect the credit of *those writers*, on whose accounts of Christianity we depend? Because some prophets, and persons that did miracles, might *work iniquity*; are *they* prov-

* Mat. 7. 22, 23. † P. 245. ‡ *Ibid.*

ed to be *workers of iniquity?* Or, becauſe " one of the Apoſtles betray'd his maſter " for the paltry ſum of thirty pieces of ſil- " ver *," muſt they all be thus *baſe*, *unfaith-ful*, and *treacherous?*

But " the other Apoſtles not only fled, " and deſerted him, but the chief of them " *forſwore him*, as often as he was ask'd " about his being one of his followers; and " he, as well as *Barnabas*, was afterwards " guilty of a mean piece of diſſimulation. " And *Paul* and *Barnabas* had ſuch *a ſharp* " *contention*, though about a very indifferent " matter, as to cauſe a ſeparation †." What does all this tend to? To deſtroy the gene-ral character of the Apoſtles as *honeſt* and *well-deſigning* men, and prove that the hiſto-ries they wrote are not to be *credited?* Cer-tainly no Inference can be more *forc'd*, and *unnatural.* For does a man's committing one or two baſe actions in the *whole courſe* of his life, tho attended with very heinous aggravations, abſolutely deſtroy his *credit*, when he has given the ſtrongeſt evidence of his having *repented* of them, and practiſed *ever after* ſuch a *ſtrict* and *inflexible* virtue, as no temptations, no hope of worldly ad-vantage, or fear of ſufferings, could corrupt? Is no allowance to be made for the frailty of human nature, and *ſudden paſſions* which *diſ-arm* the mind, and render *the ſuccours of rea-ſon* uſeleſs? May not a perſon be ſo *ſurpriz'd*

* P. 245. † *Ibid.*

by

by an unexpected temptation, as to betray the cause of virtue, who would sooner die, than meditate and utter a *cool deliberate* falshood? And was not this beyond dispute the case of the Apostles?

If when their grief had *dispirited* them, and in the *consternation* they were under at seeing all their hopes of a temporal kingdom disappointed, they *fled*, and *deserted* their master; they afterwards preach'd him boldly, in defiance of all the *terrors* of the world, and bore their testimony to the truth of his doctrine, miracles, and resurrection, with a noble contempt of *dangers* and *death*. If Peter *denied and forswore him*, it cost him a deep and bitter repentance; and this repentance was demonstrated to be sincere by his *unshaken steadiness* and *constancy* afterwards, and chusing *deliberately* to die rather than *again deny him*. And if *he*, *as well as* Barnabas, *was guilty of a mean piece of dissimulation*, to the betraying the liberty of the *Gentile* converts, in compliance with the stiffness and prejudices of the *Jews*, it does not follow that this was *design'd dishonestly*; might it not be a mere error of judgment about the *prudential* part of conduct? And to strengthen this, which is by far the most *fair* and *candid* supposition; was not his behaviour upon the whole the reverse of *wilful falshood?* Or is every one who has *once* or *twice* dissembled and prevaricated, from a *mistake* more probably, than a principle of *insince-*

rity, a witneſs not fit to be *credited*; eſpecially if when we view him in the general courſe of his actions (which is the only juſt way of eſtimating *characters*) he plainly appears to be a perſon of *honour* and *integrity*, and when all circumſtances conſpire to confirm the *truth* of his teſtimony?

NOTWITHSTANDING theſe blemiſhes and faults in the lives of the Apoſtles, we may, I am perſuaded, challenge the adverſaries of Chriſtianity to produce witneſſes ſo *credible* to any fact, in any *age*, or *hiſtory*, as they; men that overcame the ſtrongeſt *prejudices* againſt the doctrine they embrac'd, and propagated; that aſſerted it in oppoſition to all their *intereſts*, and without the leaſt diſtant proſpect of *honour*, or *advantage*; whom the cruelleſt perſecutions could not *diſcourage*; nay, who *bravely dy'd* in defenſe of it. Let thoſe, who now take an *ungenerous* pleaſure in aggravating their failings, conſider the *difficulties* they labour'd under, and the *uncommon* temptations with which they were oblig'd to encounter, and then aſk themſelves ſeriouſly, whether they know of any, who they have reaſon to believe, in ſuch circumſtances, would have had *fewer*; and whether upon the whole, they are not very extraordinary examples of *integrity* and *courage*?

EVEN the *weakneſs* and *cowardice* they before diſcover'd rather confirms than invali-

dates the testimony they gave afterwards. For that the very same persons should adhere *inflexibly* to the cause of him whom they had *deserted*, with nothing in expectation but *disgrace* and *sufferings*, and dying the death of *malefactors*, can be accounted for no other way than this, that they were sensible of the crime they had committed, and had arm'd themselves with the greater *resolution*. And what could be sufficient to *animate* and *support* such a resolution, but a firm belief of the truth of the doctrine they preach'd? What but their being convinc'd that it was their *indispensable duty* to maintain and defend it; and preferring what they apprehended to be the cause of true religion, and the reformation and happiness of mankind, *to all other considerations?* There is no proof in the world so strong as this of mens being in *earnest*; and to urge their equivocating, and being afraid to own the truth in one or two instances, as an argument why they are not to be depended on, when they asserted and maintain'd it to the hazard of their *ease*, *liberties*, and *lives*, is urging *contradictions* to support each other. With respect to the Apostles, the appearances of danger were not at all lessen'd, but more *near* and *immediate*. And therefore, when we find these same fearful men, who had before manifested such *weakness* and *pusillanimity*, inspir'd with an *invincible fortitude* and *constancy*; we cannot help supposing what has been already suggested, either that they were more *firmly*

perſuaded of the truth of Chriſtianity; or that when their fears betray'd them it was thro' *ſurprize*, whereas their after-conduct, in which they diſcover'd ſo much honeſty and intrepidity, was the reſult of their *deliberate judgment*, upon a full conviction of their neceſſity of ſuch a behaviour; or elſe, that God afforded them *extraordinary ſupports* in proportion to the greatneſs of their trials, that they might bear up in publiſhing ſo *excellent* and *uſeful* a doctrine as the Chriſtian revelation contain'd, againſt all the oppoſition that was made to it by the *prejudices* and *vices* of the world.

THE objection which the ingenious author makes againſt the characters of *Paul* and *Barnabas*, to leſſen their credit as *hiſtorians*, or *witneſſes* to the facts of Chriſtianity, *viz.* that they "had ſuch *a ſharp contention*, tho about a very indifferent matter, "as to cauſe a ſeparation," ſcarce deſerves a grave anſwer. For *ſtiffneſs*, *heat*, and *vehemence* of temper, are very different things from *diſhoneſty*; and the proving againſt a perſon that he was apt to *grow warm* in diſpute, and ſometimes to quarrel with his *beſt friends*, would not (if his *veracity* was unblemiſh'd) be of the leaſt weight, nor at all affect his credit as a witneſs in any *court of judicature*. And yet this is much more than can be ſhewn to be included in the preſent caſe. For the whole of the fact, as it is related in the acts of the Apoſtles, amounts to

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no more than this; that they differ'd once about the *expediency* of chusing a particular person to be a companion in their travels (which might not be quite so *indifferent a matter* as this author represents it) and were each so *intent* and *eager* upon gaining his point, that they *separated* upon it. But it does not appear, that they manag'd the debate in an *indecent abusive* way, or that they parted without a perfect *friendship* and *esteem* for each other.

And as to what he adds farther with relation to St. *Paul*, that "even he says, * *The* "*good that I would, I do not; but the evil* "*which I would not, that I do.* —— *But I see* "*another law in my members, warring against* "*the law of my mind, and bringing me into* "*captivity to the law of sin, which is in my* "*members.* And a great deal more to the "same purpose †;" I am sorry to observe, that it shews a determin'd resolution, if possible, to asperse one of the *greatest characters* in history, whose *generous* services for the good of others, *noble ardour* in the cause of *liberty*, and *inflexible self-denying* virtue, none of the opposers of Christianity have ever *exceeded*, and few of them can pretend to *equal* without the most *manifest disadvantage*. Even an *ingenuous adversary* would take pleasure in doing justice to such *extraordinary merit*, and not entertain a thought of detracting from it;

* Rom. vii. 19, 23. † P. 245.

and

and the very attempt to represent this excellent Apostle as a slave to his *appetites*, influenc'd by *carnal* views, and one that acted against the *reason* and *judgment* of his own mind, must *sink the reputation* of any writer with considerate and impartial men.

BUT does he not expressly assert all this of himself in the passages referr'd to? Our author indeed *seems* to think so, but it appears from many other instances, as well as this, that the excellency of his genius does not lie in writing *comments* upon scripture; but that on the contrary, he frequently quotes independent passages merely for their *sound*, and the *appearance* they make; which would be exclaim'd against as barbarous treatment of any *other writers*, and can serve only to amuse and confound an *ignorant* and *inattentive* reader. And with respect to the instance now before us, 'tis plain to every one that reads St. *Paul*'s epistles with *care*, and a desire to *understand* them, that he was a most *genteel* and *tender* writer, and oftentimes speaks of things, that might otherwise be ungrateful and offensive, in his *own name*, when the characters he gives belong entirely to *others*, and not at all to *himself*. Thus in this very epistle to the *Romans*, * *If the truth of God hath more abounded through my lye, why am I judged as a sinner?* i. e. not I *Paul*, but I who make the objection. At other times, he

* Chap. iii. 7.

puts

puts himself into descriptions of the corrupt and deplorable state of *Gentile idolaters* before their conversion. And that we are to make use of *this key* to find out the true sense of those passages in the 7th chapter to the *Romans*, which this author has *abus'd*, is evident from hence; that the description there given is of a *vicious* man, who had pretty strong convictions of his duty, but acted against the light and dictates of *conscience*; of one whose passions were *too strong* for his reason, and brought him into *captivity*; who was *carnal, and sold under sin*; a phrase that always denotes a state of *wilful* and *habitual* wickedness. And besides the great absurdity of supposing, that St. *Paul* design'd to represent his *own character* in this view, at the same time that he set up for a *reformer*, and therefore was oblig'd to affect the *appearance at least* of extraordinary sanctity; besides this, I say, that he had not really such bad thoughts of *himself*, and consequently, that what he says is intended as a representation of others, though he speaks in his *own name*, is plain, beyond all dispute, from several passages in his epistles, in which 'tis undeniable he must mean himself *personally*; because he either vindicates his *own character*, or proposes himself as an *example* for imitation, or appeals to those to whom he wrote for his *integrity*. Thus particularly, in his epistle to the *Thessalonians* he says, *Ye are witnesses, and God also, how holily, and justly, and unblameably we behav'd*

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ourſelves among you that believe ††. To the Corinthians, *This is our rejoicing, the teſtimony of our conſcience, that in ſimplicity and godly ſincerity, not with fleſhly wiſdom, but by the grace of God*, or according to that excellent and perfect rule of morality which is contain'd in the goſpel, *we have had our converſation in the world* *; that he *knew nothing by*, or againſt, *himſelf* †; that he *kept under his body, and brought it into ſubjection* ‡. And to mention no more, he reſents with a generous ſcorn and indgnation the ſcandalous charge of thoſe, who repreſented him as *walking after the fleſh*; and declares, that though he *walk'd in the fleſh*, he did *not walk after the fleſh* **. Is it then at all natural to ſuppoſe, that he meant himſelf, when he drew a character directly the *reverſe* of this; eſpecially when we find, that it was a very *uſual* thing with him (as indeed it is common with writers now) to ſpeak in his own name things that were entirely deſign'd for others; and when it appears from the whole of his hiſtory, that he *fully deſerv'd* that all thoſe things ſhould be affirm'd of him, which, notwithſtanding his great modeſty, he was oblig'd to mention in his own *vindication*, and to ſilence the *calumnies* of his adverſaries? Such a method of explaining paſſages is contrary to all rules of *fair interpretation*; and whatever other purpoſes it may ſerve, is the way to make any author for ever *unintelligible*.

†† 1 Ep. ii. 10. * 2 Ep. i. 12. † 1 Ep. iv. 4.
‡ 1 Ep. 9. 27. ** 2 Cor. x. 2, 3.

IT will be needleſs to take much notice of what is farther alledg'd †† from the catholic epiſtle of St. *Barnabas*, " That Jeſus, " when he choſe his Apoſtles, which were " afterwards to publiſh his goſpel, took men " who had been very great ſinners; that there- " by he might plainly ſhew, *he came not to call* " *the righteous, but ſinners to repentance* *," be the words ever ſo much ſtronger and *fuller in the original* †; or of the *ſcurrility* of *Celſus* (of which I chooſe to give an *Engliſh tranſlation*, that the unlearned reader may not think there is any thing of argument in it) *viz.* " that Jeſus having pick'd up ten or eleven " infamous men, the moſt profligate publi- " cans and fiſhermen, ſtrol'd about the coun- " try with them, demanding [or begging and " mumping for] victuals in the moſt baſe and " ſhameful manner ‡;" 'twill be needleſs, I ſay, to take much notice of this, becauſe whatever their character was before they became the followers of Chriſt, they behav'd *afterwards*, in the general courſe of their actions, with the greateſt *honour* and *integrity*, and gave ſuch evidence of an *ingenuous* temper of mind as few hiſtories can

†† P. 49.

* Wake's *Tranſlation*, § 5. p. 272.

† Ὄντας ὑπὲρ πᾶσαν ἁμαρτίαν ἀνομωτέρους.

‡ *The words, as this author gives them in the* Latin *tranſlation, are*, p. 50. Jeſum, aſcitis decem undecimve famoſis hominibus, publicanis, nautiſque nequiſſimis, cum his ultro citróque fugitâſſe, corrogantem cibos ſordidè ac turpiter. *Origen. cont. Celſum.* l. 1. p. 47

parallel.

parallel. When they bore witneſs to the truth of Chriſtianity, their lives in the main were unexceptionable, nay, fit to be propos'd as *examples* for the world to imitate. And nothing but an uncommon degree of *honeſty* and *reſolution* could break ſuch ſtrong habits of vice, and cauſe ſuch a prodigious alteration in their conduct.

NOR do I think that what the ingenious author adds, " in ſupport of St. *Barnabas*," either confirms his account of them before they were choſen to be Apoſtles, or in the leaſt invalidates their teſtimony, *viz.* " that they " firſt became Jeſus's diſciples upon temporal " motives; and the belief of Chriſt's tempo- " ral kingdom was ſo firmly rooted in them, " that Jeſus neither during his life, nor even " after his reſurrection, was able to remove " it †." For does this prove that they were the *baſeſt* and *vileſt* of men? Nay, does their falling in with the common error of their country-men prove, even in general, that they were *bad men?* How could perſons of *real probity and virtue* become the diſciples of one, whom they took to be their Meſſiah, but upon *temporal* motives, when they had no notions of his kingdom but as a *temporal* kingdom? 'Tis plain, however, that though they retain'd this falſe notion even after our Saviour's reſurrection, they were at length convinc'd of their miſtake, and propagated

† P. 50.

his

his doctrine without the least hope of *preferment*, or *worldly advantage*. And what better evidence could they give of their honesty than overcoming their strongest *prejudices*; correcting a *favourite* and *darling sentiment*, upon which all their hopes were originally grounded; and adhering to the cause of Christ, not only when the temporal motives upon which they set out *ceas'd to operate*, but in defiance of the bittereſt *reproaches*, the greateſt *abuſes* and *ſufferings*, and all the terrors of an *ignominious* and *cruel* death?

THUS have I particularly conſider'd every thing, that I know is urg'd by the author of *Chriſtianity* &c. againſt the *moral character* of the writers of the New Teſtament, with a view to weaken the *credibility* of their hiſtory. As this is a point of the higheſt importance, with which the truth of the *Chriſtian religion itſelf* muſt either ſtand, or fall, I was not willing to paſs by any part of it; though perhaps I ſhall be cenſur'd for taking notice of ſome things, which may be thought too trifling to deſerve a *ſerious animadverſion*. And it muſt be a great pleaſure to the friends of Chriſtianity, that the moſt *critical* and *malicious* inquirers, who rake together all that looks *plauſible*, and *ſtrain* and *exaggerate* every circumſtance, can find ſo few faults in the lives of men, who were call'd to act ſo *nice* a part, and met with ſuch *extraordinary* temptations and difficulties. Theirs, it muſt be remember'd, in the whole extent of it,

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was a part but *once acted*; and therefore we can't be ſure, that the moſt virtuous, who ſtruggle bravely with the common trials of life, would behave well in it. And the greateſt of their defects are eaſily to be accounted for by ſuppoſing, that, in the beginning eſpecially, they were liable to *ſurprizes*, from which the moſt *honeſt* and *reſolute* are not always exempted, and by which they may be *betrayed*. We may therefore ſafely reſt the matter upon this iſſue, the *capacity* and *integrity* of the writers of the New Teſtament, as what is fully ſufficient to eſtabliſh the *credibility* of their hiſtory. But there are ſome other circumſtances that very much *heighten* the probability, which I ſhall therefore briefly mention. And,

1. It ought not to be omitted, that the ſame facts are related in the goſpels by *four* different hiſtorians (and two of 'em, at leaſt, eye-witneſſes) with ſo much agreement in all material paſſages, as has greatly the air of *veracity*; but with ſo much variety, as ſhews they were not wrote in *concert*.

2. These hiſtories were publiſh'd but *a few years* after the facts recorded in them are pretended to have been perform'd, in a manner open and viſible to the whole Jewiſh nation. The accounts contained in them are alſo, in ſeveral inſtances, very *particular* and *circumſtantial*, with ſpecification of *time* and *place*, and of the *names* and *characters* of the per-

persons concern'd; which made it much more easy (if there had been any) to *detect* the imposture. And this publication of them was not in *remote* and *distant* countries, where there was no danger of *discovering* the *cheat*, but upon the very *same stage* where the miracles are said to have been wrought. Now all this is a strong probability, that the authors of these accounts were sure of the *goodness* of their cause, and did not fear the utmost *wit* and *malice* of their enemies. For 'tis hardly supposeable, that the most bold and impudent impostors would put the entire success of their undertaking upon the *truth* of facts, that to a whole nation were *notoriously false*; and besides, 'tis *morally impossible* such accounts should gain credit; but on the contrary, pretences to *known* and *public* miracles, when nothing at all of that kind was perform'd, must necessarily have been confuted, and consequently have ended in the speedy and entire *suppression* and *ruin* of Christianity.

It has indeed been objected, that several books may have been written to expose the *imposture* of the first Christians, which afterwards, when they got the power in their own hands by the conversion of the *Roman Emperors*, were *destroy'd*; but that no such *contradictory* accounts were ever publish'd, *early enough* to invalidate the authority of the gospel-history, is to me most evident from a consideration that has been already suggested, *viz.* that the *immediate consequence* of it, the

world being ſo little inclin'd to favour Chriſtianity muſt have been its *utter extirpation*. And ſince it was not cruſh'd in its *very infancy*, as without doubt it would have been, if thoſe who propagated it had been convicted of *fraud* and *knavery*; nay, ſince it *grew* and *flouriſh'd* in ſpite of all the oppoſition that was made to it, which, upon the ſuppoſition that the goſpel-hiſtory was *contradicted* and *confuted*, no reaſonable man can account for; this affords the ſtrongeſt preſumption, that a thing of that nature was never attempted, and conſequently that the objection is a *mere calumny*, invented by the enemies of our holy religion for want of *better evidence*. I call it a calumny, becauſe it is deſign'd to throw an *odium* on a body of men upon *mere ſurmiſe* and *conjecture*, which has no ſolid foundation to ſupport it; and if this muſt paſs for evidence, no hiſtories in the world can ſtand, becauſe we cannot be ſure that they have not, at ſome time or other, been *contradicted*; and thus men may reject every thing which they have *no mind to believe*. We may obſerve,

3. With reſpect to the extraordinary and miraculous gifts of the *Holy Ghoſt* after our Saviour's reſurrection, that St. *Paul* in his epiſtles to Chriſtian churches mentions theſe gifts as *very common* among them, appeals to their own knowledge and experience, and leaves the *truth of Chriſtianity*, and *his own authority*, to be entirely determin'd by this

this fact. But can we suppose, that any one of *common modesty*, shall I say, or *common prudence*, would act thus, if he knew that all he had wrote was *false?* Had it not a natural tendency to bring his character, and the cause in which he was embarqu'd, into *contempt?* And can it be thought, that among such numbers, none would have *ingenuity* and *honesty* enough to contradict and expose such an *impudent* and *barefac'd* falshood. Would not such appeals, for which there was no real foundation, soon have been known by the enemies of Christianity; and could a few *insignificant* persons have stood the just *ridicule* and *indignation* of all the *virtuous* part of mankind upon such an occasion? Must not they, and the cause they had espous'd, have *sunk together?*

But we find that the apostle *Paul* proceeds much farther, even to blame the *Corinthians* for an *abuse* of their extraordinary gifts, and particularly of the gift of tongues *; and can we think that they would have born this rebuke, if they had been so far from *misimproving* and *perverting* such extraordinary powers, that they were never *possess'd* of them? Or would a man of any sense or knowledge of the world, especially a *cunning impostor*, have made an objection, to which so ready an answer might be given, and an answer that must have been so much to his *confusion*, and

* *In the 12th, 13th, and 14th chapters of his first epistle.*

have greatly endanger'd his *main deſign?* Mens *vanity* perhaps may be ſo *ſtrong*, that when they are commended for extraordinary qualities which they really want, they may think it agreeable enough, and not be forward to *undeceive* the world, by declaring themſelves unworthy of the great honour that is done them; but when ſuch gifts are mention'd in a way that is a *reproach* to them, the *ſame principle* will naturally incline them to detect the cheat. And there muſt have been the more danger of it in the caſe of the *Corinthians*, becauſe there was a falſe Apoſtle among them, who ſet himſelf up in *oppoſition* to St. *Paul*, and endeavour'd to *leſſen* and *degrade* his miniſtry; for ſuch a one, with the *faction* he had actually form'd, would undoubtedly have thought this an excellent handle to blaſt his credit, and it's likely, have made a merit of ruining his reputation by a ſhew of *zeal for truth*, and by diſcovering and expoſing *impoſture*.

It may ſeem ſtrange, perhaps, notwithſtanding all that has been ſaid, if the extraordinary facts recorded in the New Teſtament were *really* perform'd, that no other hiſtorians, who liv'd about that time, ſhould take notice of them; none but *Chriſtian writers*, who are too much *a party* to have any conſiderable weight in this controverſy, becauſe they were engag'd to be advocates for them by their very profeſſion of Chriſtianity. To which the anſwer is plain (without entering at all into

into the debate how far the matter of fact is true) that the *silence* of historians as to some things, which are unquestionable, is frequent in *other cases*, as well as in this; that it does not, in the nature of the thing, at all invalidate the testimony of those who are upon all accounts *credible*; that if we could not assign a reason for it, it would be no wonder, considering that we know not the *principles* by which men are *directed* and *influenc'd*; that, however, this omission might be owing to those facts not falling in with the *general design* of their history; and besides, it could not reasonably be expected, that while they continued *Jews* or *Heathens*, they should relate events so favourable to a *new religion*, and by which they must condemn themselves, the one for rejecting their *Messiah*, and the other for persisting in the *idolatry* and *superstition* of their ancestors; and if they became *Christians* upon the credit of these facts, their testimony would no more be admitted than that of other *Christian writers* of *equal antiquity*. But we have, to confirm the *credibility* of the gospel-history, with respect to the miraculous gifts of the Holy Ghost conferr'd upon the Apostles, *&c.* what fully supplies the want of this *foreign testimony*, and is indeed abundantly *superior* to it, *viz.* the success of the gospel; an event, which is just what might be expected if this history be *true*, but upon the contrary supposition is very *strange* and *unaccountable*.

THAT a great part of the world is *now* Chriſtian we all know; we are ſure likewiſe, that it has been ſo for *many ages* paſt; and if we look back and inquire when it came to be ſo, we find by the concurrent teſtimony both of *Pagan* and *Chriſtian Hiſtorians*, that Chriſtianity had its beginning in *Judea*, juſt at the time in which the *ſacred hiſtorians* place it. And by the ſame teſtimony we learn, that in a very ſhort ſpace, in about *forty years* after, it was preach'd in all the provinces of the *Roman* empire; and that wherever it was preach'd, it made a very *ſwift* progreſs, inſomuch that in a few years the number of Chriſtians became *very conſiderable*. For that they had increaſed greatly at *Rome*, ſo early as in *Nero*'s reign, we learn from the *Roman* hiſtorian *Cornelius Tacitus*; who informs us, that when the Emperor, to clear himſelf from the charge of burning that city, laid the blame of it upon the Chriſtians, and, began, under that pretence, a moſt ſevere and cruel perſecution of *them*, *a great multitude* * ſuffer'd. And it was not much above *ſixty years* after the Apoſtles had diſpers'd themſelves, in order to preach the goſpel to the *Gentiles*, when *Pliny* proconſul of *Bithynia* wrote that epiſtle to the emperor *Trajan*, in which, giving an account of the Chriſtians, then under a ſevere perſecution for their religion by the emperor's order, and

* Ingens multitudo. *Annal. lib.*

deſiring

desiring to be instructed how he should proceed towards them, he tells him, that, " he " thought it a matter worthy of deliberation, chiefly because of the *great number* " of persons that [by the laws against Christians] were in danger of suffering. For " many of every age, of all orders, and of " both sexes are call'd in question, and will " be. For this superstition has not only infected cities and towns, but the villages and " hamlets. The temples of the Gods are " almost desolate, the solemn rites of our " religion have been long neglected and o- " mitted, and there are scarce any who will " buy the sacrifices †."

Now what account shall we give of this great event? 'Tis utterly improbable, that Christianity prevail'd so much in the world, in so short a time, only by *natural means.* The *gift of tongues* was absolutely necessary to enable the Apostles to propagate the gospel in all nations; and if they had a sufficient skill in all the languages of the different countries, without *other miracles*, they could never have convinc'd mankind that their master was a prophet sent from God, nor have engaged them to submit to the authority

† Visa est mihi res digna consultatione; maximè propter periclitantium multitudinem. Multi enim omnis ætatis, omnis ordinis, utriusque sexûs vocantur in periculum, & vocabuntur; neque enim civitates tantum, sed vicos etiam atque agros superstitionis illius contagio pervasit. Prope desolata sunt Deorum templa, sacra solennia diu intermissa, & rarissimi victimarum emptores. *Epist.* 97.

of his religion. For ſuppoſe they had gone into any part of the world remote from *Judea*, and after they had aſſembled the people together, made a ſpeech to them to this effect: " We come to preach to you in the " name of Jeſus, and require you to ſubject " yourſelves to him, whom God hath made " the Lord of all. He was a great king in " *Iſrael*, and did many wonders in that na- " tion, though he was hated and rejected by " them, and at length crucified; but God " rais'd him from the dead on the third day, " and we ſaw him go into heaven, where he " is enthron'd in moſt glorious majeſty, and " reigns over angels and men. Caſt away " therefore all your antient Gods; forſake " your ſuperſtitious rites and ceremonies; " believe in him, and ſubmit to his govern- " ment; though you get nothing by it in this " world, but perhaps may loſe all you have, " he will reward you for it in his heavenly " kingdom." What force, do you think, there would have been in ſuch a ſpeech, to perſuade the nations far diſtant from *Jeruſalem* to fall down before him as their ſovereign? Would they not have ſmiled, and ſaid, " What do theſe bablers mean, to bring us " ſuch ſtrange ſtories from a foreign land? " Why ſhould we acknowledge him to be " our king, whom his own country-men " would not ſuffer to rule over them? What " evidence do you bring us that the things " which you relate of him are true? As " you require us to renounce the religion of

" our anceſtors, and the Gods whom we " ſerve, produce your credentials from hea- " ven." This was likely to have been the moſt *favourable anſwer* they would have met with, in any nation.

BUT the ſucceſs of the goſpel, without miracles to ſupport it, will appear yet *more incredible*, if we conſider the nature of the doctrine itſelf, which is ſo *ſtrict* and *pure*, as muſt neceſſarily be ungrateful to the *corrupt paſſions* of men; their *ſtrong prejudices* in favour of thoſe religious principles in which they have been educated; that they could not embrace it without renouncing their moſt valuable *preſent intereſts*, and being expos'd to *reproach* and *perſecution*; that it was publiſh'd by plain illiterate men, of no *figure*, or *influence*; and made its way in the moſt *ingenious* and *civiliz'd* nations, in oppoſition to all the learning, power, policy, and malice of the world *combin'd* againſt it. Theſe circumſtances, I ſay, render the propagation of the goſpel by *natural means only* ſtill more *incredible*, and conſequently confirm the reality of the miraculous gifts of the Holy Ghoſt mention'd in the New Teſtament, which were exercis'd by Chriſtians, according to the accounts they give, at the very time when Chriſtianity firſt *took root*, and made ſuch an *amazing progreſs*. Can any rational man then refuſe to believe that ſuch extraordinary powers were *actually communicated*, when it appears *beſides*, that there is the moſt

credible

credible testimony given to these great facts that can be desir'd in any case, how important soever; and *the thing in general*, viz. the introducing so excellent a religion as the Christian into the world, is worthy the *peculiar direction* and *care* of providence? Or if he will not allow this, must he not chuse to believe a thing in a way in which he *can never account* for it, when he might give an *easy* and *satisfactory solution* of it to his own mind? Which is the wildest absurdity, and I may add (though our adversaries perhaps will think it strange to be charged themselves, with what seems in their opinion to belong only to the believers of revelation) *enthusiasm*.

I HOPE it will not be thought *a digression* from my main design, if I briefly consider the peculiar weight and force of the argument, from *the miraculous gifts of the Holy Ghost*, for the truth and divine authority of the Christian religion. And,

1. WE find, that our blessed Saviour, before his death, *foretold* this great event, and appeal'd to it as a future most *glorious* and *convincing* testimony of God in his favour. His words are very *determinate* and *express*, and have nothing of the *ambiguity* of the Heathen oracles: *He that believeth on me, the works that I do, shall he do also: and greater works than these shall he do, because I go unto my Father* *. And again, *nevertheless I tell you*

* John xiv. 12.

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*the truth, it is expedient for you that I go away; for if I go not away, the comforter (who is the Holy Ghoſt *) will not come unto you: but if I depart, I will ſend him unto you, And when he is come, he will reprove,* or convince, *the world of ſin, becauſe they believe not in me; and of righteouſneſs,* of my integrity and innocence, and of the truth and juſtice of my cauſe, *becauſe I go to my Father* †. If therefore this great event happen'd (as hath been already prov'd) according to his prediction, it muſt be *a certain demonſtration* that he was ſent of God. For it can't be imagin'd, that the perfectly wiſe and righteous governour of the world would ſuffer an impoſtor to produce ſuch *ſtrong credentials* of a divine authority; credentials, which, as they appear'd in conſequence of an *appeal* to him, muſt be look'd upon as *his own teſtimony*; and could not but deceive the moſt *honeſt* and *impartial* of his creatures.

2. THESE gifts of the Holy Ghoſt confirm the *reality* of the miracles, ſaid to be performed by Chriſt in the courſe of his own miniſtry, by ſhewing undeniably that he was a *true prophet*; and put the truth of his *reſurrection* out of doubt, by eſtabliſhing, beyond all exception, the *credibility* of the Apoſtles teſtimony. So that they may juſtly be look'd upon as the ſtrongeſt and fulleſt proofs of the truth and certainty of the Chriſ-

* John xiv. *Ver.* 26. † *Chap.* 16. 7——10.

tian

tian faith, becauſe they render all the other proofs more *clear* and *convincing*, with the additional weight of *new miracles*. But beſides this,

3. THERE are ſome circumſtances *in the fact itſelf*, which render it the moſt important and complete evidence of the divinity of our holy religion. For inſtance, what could be more wonderful, than that *illiterate* men ſhould give a ſcheme of natural religion more perfect than any of the wiſeſt of the *Philoſophers* ever did; and that they ſhould be inſtructed, *all of a ſudden*, in thoſe points which they were before ignorant of, or concerning which they had the common miſtakes of their countrymen? And as a judicious writer obſerves, "There is ſomething in this "*gift of wiſdom* peculiarly fitted to ſhew, "that the doctrine it confirms came from "God. Works of mere power might be "perform'd by evil ſpirits; but that evil ſpi-"rits ſhould furniſh men with the know-"ledge and ability to publiſh to the world "a ſcheme of doctrine, in all the parts of it, "the beſt fitted that could be to reform man-"kind, ſeems perfectly incredible *."

AGAIN, theſe miraculous powers were communicated to *a greater number* of perſons than in our Saviour's life-time, or any

* Jeffery's *Chriſtianity the perfection of all religions*, &c. P. 166.

age

age of the world before; and that not in one country only, but in *different*, and *far distant*, parts of the world. There was likewise *a greater variety* of them; and the Apostles were not only endued with them themselves, but could confer them upon others, a manifest sign that the power of God *constantly* attended them. All which circumstances render the proof of Christianity, by this fact, most *sure* and *convincing*. For though if a doctrine be worthy of God, and tends to promote the practice of virtue, and the happiness of mankind, *one* or *two* real miracles are sufficient to establish its authority; yet in this case, we cannot be so certain of the truth of the facts as when they are *more numerous*; because 'tis more likely, that *one* or *two* men may have a *lucky* and *dextrous* way of doing a trick, so as constantly to *amuse* and *astonish* the spectators, than *a great number*, some of whom, 'tis highly probable, will, one time or other, by *a bungling performance*, discover the *fraud*; and the same miracles perform'd in *various*, and *far distant*, parts of the world, where the actors could not have frequent communication with each other, are less liable to dispute, than such as are confin'd to a *particular country*.

To which let me add, that the gift of tongues, is, *in itself*, of all miracles one of the most *plain* and *unquestionable*. For 'tis possible thro' their ignorance of the *powers of nature*, that men, in many instances, may look

look upon thoſe things as miraculous effects, which are only the ſecret operations of natural cauſes; but we all know the force of nature ſo well, that we are ſure the knowledge of a language cannot, *in a natural way*, be attain'd *in an inſtant*; becauſe words are *arbitrary* ſigns, and therefore can only be underſtood by *learning*, and *retaining in our memories*, the particular ideas they are intended to expreſs; upon which account, it muſt take up *a very conſiderable ſpace of time*, for a man to get himſelf ſo well acquainted with *ſeveral different languages*, as to be able to converſe *eaſily* and *familiarly* in them all. So that this, in particular, and the other miraculous gifts of the Holy Ghoſt, by reaſon of the *peculiar circumſtances* that attended them, may juſtly be eſteem'd the *ſtrongeſt proof* of the truth of our religion; as they are in themſelves moſt *certain* and *indiſputable*, and contain the *united evidence* of miracles, and the accompliſhment of moſt *expreſs* and *determinate* prophecies, concerning which there can be no *controverſy*; and as they corroborate, and render more firm and unqueſtionable, *every other part of its external proof*. And finally, 'tis to this extraordinary evidence (as we have ſeen) that we muſt aſcribe the ſwift and extenſive progreſs of the goſpel; which is a kind of *ſtanding miracle*, to ſupply in a great meaſure to us, in theſe *remote times*, the want of thoſe other miracles before our eyes, which were common in the firſt ages of Chriſtianity.

THE greateſt part of what has been ſaid hitherto relates only to the books of the New Teſtament which were *univerſally receiv'd*; but what muſt we think of thoſe which were *controverted* in the moſt *early times*, when their authority could be beſt ſettled; the *epiſtle* to the *Hebrews*, for inſtance, and the *epiſtle* of *James*, the *ſecond* of *Peter*, the *epiſtle* of *Jude*, the *ſecond* and *third* of *John*, and the *book* of the *Revelation?* I anſwer, that if the *genuineneſs* of theſe books could not be prov'd, Chriſtianity would be but little affected by it; becauſe thoſe which are *unconteſtable* contain a complete account of the Chriſtian doctrine, and the evidence by which it is ſupported; nay, if we were only ſure of the *four Goſpels*, and the *Acts* of the *Apoſtles*, theſe *alone* would be abundantly ſufficient. Nor will the determining this queſtion, which way ſoever it happens, weaken in any *material* point the force of what I have already advanc'd, in which I have taken care all along to argue only from thoſe books, the authenticneſs of which, as far as appears, was never *diſputed*; and conſequently of whoſe being really authentic, we have all the *probability* that the circumſtances of the caſe will bear; as great *at leaſt* (and upon ſome accounts, I think, it has been ſhewn to be *much greater*) than there is with reſpect to *any writings beſides*, of equal antiquity. But there are ſeveral things urg'd to prove, that the authority of thoſe books, that were not

at firſt *univerſally acknowledg'd*, is not ſo *dubious* and *uncertain* as it has been repreſented; and which, tho they may not amount to an *equal probability*, may be thought *a probability however*, that they, as well as the other books which were never queſtion'd, are the *genuine writings* of the Apoſtles of Chriſt. The ſubſtance of the argument upon this head, I ſhall give in the words of the late pious and judicious Biſhop *Blackall* *.

1. He ſays, " that there is good evidence " from antiquity, that theſe *controverted books* " were receiv'd in the moſt early times, by " thoſe who had the beſt opportunity of ſa- " tisfying themſelves of the authors, and " authority thereof, *viz.* by thoſe to whom " they were ſent, and in general by the whole " *Greek* church.

" 2. That 'tis no wonder, that *theſe* " *books* (being written either to Chriſtians diſ- " pers'd, and conſequently only publiſh'd by " giving out copies thereof to ſome, to be " communicated, as there was opportunity, " to others; or elſe to private perſons, living " perhaps at great diſtance from the places " from which they were ſent) were not ſo " eaſy to be atteſted, and upon that account " were not at firſt ſo generally receiv'd, as " the others were, which were either written

* *Sermons at* Boyle's *Lecture* 4to. *Sermon the third*; p. 20, 21, 22.

" to

" to particular churches, to which the authors " hands, and the messengers that brought " them, were well known, or which were " first publish'd and receiv'd in the same " places where they were written. And,

" 3. THAT even *those churches*, which " did for some time *doubt* of the authority of " *these books*, were persuaded at last to re- " ceive them as the *authentic writings* of the " *Apostles*, or other inspir'd men. If there- " fore it be suppos'd, that while they doubted " of these books they had *reason* for their " doubt; that is, that they did it because " they were not as yet fully satisfied that " they were *Apostolical writings*, (which the " objectors, I believe, will readily enough " grant) it may be very reasonably presum'd, " that they had afterwards *greater reason* " to lay aside their doubt; and that when " they did receive them, it was, because " there had been then lately such evidence " and attestation given of their being written " by the *Apostles*, or other inspir'd men, as " they had not heard of before, such as they " could not then, with any reason, contra- " dict or gainsay; for ordinarily, a less rea- " son will persuade a man to take up an o- " pinion at first, than will persuade him to " go back from an opinion (how weakly so- " ever grounded) which he has before em- " brac'd and defended."

THE fact, as it is here *truely* ſtated, is juſt what it might be preſum'd *would happen*, with reſpect to ſuch writings as theſe. A ſufficient account is given why they were not at firſt *univerſally receiv'd*; nay indeed, why it was not to be expected they *would be*, ſuppoſing them to be *authentic*. But upon this ſuppoſition it's natural to believe, that though it might be *a conſiderable time* before they could be atteſted in ſuch a manner, as to give ſatisfaction to *all Chriſtians*, they would *at length* however appear to be *genuine*; and be receiv'd accordingly (as they really were) even by *thoſe churches*, who for ſome time *doubted* of their authority.

" So that (as the ſame author adds) this " objection is ſo far from leſſening, that it " rather ſtrengthens, the proof we have of " the authority even of thoſe once *contro-* " *verted books*; and it is, beſides, a very good " corroborating evidence of the authority of " *all* the *other books* of the *New Teſtament*. " For the backwardneſs of ſome churches to " receive theſe *controverted books* at firſt " (when they had nothing to object to the " matter of them) makes it evident, the " Chriſtians of the firſt ages were not ſo very " eaſy and credulous as ſome have repreſent- " ed them; that they did not ſo very greedi- " ly ſwallow any book for divine revelation, " that contain'd a great many miracles, mix'd " with a few good morals, without making

" due

" due inquiry concerning the author, and " the authority thereof. But on the contra- " ry, their being so hard to be persuaded to " receive these controverted books for some " time, while they wanted, as they thought, " sufficient attestation, (although the doctrine " of them was in all points agreeable to the " doctrine of the other books which they " had before receiv'd; their being so hard, " I say, to receive these books) of the autho- " rity of which there nevertheless really was " such evidence, as they themselves, after hav- " ing well weigh'd and consider'd it, declar'd " themselves satisfied with, gives very good " ground to believe, that they had, from the " beginning, such evidence as was without " exception of the authority of *all those other* " *books* (that is, of much the greatest part) " of the *New Testament*, which were never " controverted, which were from the first, " and with universal consent, receiv'd by all " Christian churches. For if there had not " been very undeniable evidence of *their* be- " ing the *genuine* writings of the *Apostles*, or " other inspired men, there would certainly " have been the same doubt and controversy " concerning them, that there once was con- " cerning these."

But supposing the authority of *all the books* of the *New Testament* to be fully esta- blish'd; how can we be sure, that they are transmitted down to us *just* as they were *writ- ten?* That, having been often transcrib'd, they

have not been *corrupted*, and *alter'd* very much by the *ignorance* or *careleſsneſs* of the tranſcribers? Or, that ſeveral, even material, paſſages are not *curtail'd* and *mangled*, and others *interpolated* by the different parties of Chriſtians, in the heat of their oppoſition to each other? By which means the face of Chriſtianity may be vaſtly *chang'd*, and render'd quite *another thing* from what it was in the beginning. "If no court of "judicature, tho in a thing of ſmall mo- "ment, will admit of a copy, tho taken "from the original, without oath made by "a diſintereſted perſon of his having com- "par'd it; becauſe the leaſt miſtake, a va- "rious pointing, a parentheſis, a letter miſ- "plac'd may alter the ſenſe; how can we "abſolutely depend in things of the greateſt "moment, on voluminous writings, which "have been ſo often tranſcrib'd by men, "who never ſaw the original; (as none, "even of the moſt early writers, pretend "they did) and men too, who even in the "earlieſt times, if we may judge by the "number of forg'd paſſages, and even forg'd "books, would ſcruple no pious frauds *." And accordingly, there are *actually*, in the preſent copies of the New Teſtament, *no leſs than* 30000 *various readings*, which this author (as all others of the ſame ſtamp) frequently mentions as a very *formidable* thing; which ſhews, they think, plainly, that theſe

* *Chriſtianity* &c. *p.* 321.

copies,

copies are in fact so very *corrupt* and *erroneus*, that they are not to be depended on.

I THINK it very strange, that ingenious men, who are able to entertain the world much better, should tire it with *stale objections*, which have been so often consider'd, and *thoroughly answer'd*; and particularly, that the author of *Christianity* &c. should publish a large book, (that from the *great expectations* that were rais'd concerning it, one might justly imagine, would contain something *new* and *decisive* upon these points) in which old difficulties are *reviv'd*, without letting his readers know that *any solutions* of them have ever been attempted, and what those solutions are; or endeavouring to shew that they are *weak* and *insufficient*. Such a conduct must be *nauseous* to those who are already well-vers'd in controversies of this kind, and looks too much like a design to mislead the *injudicious* and *unwary*. And after all, what do these objections amount to? Why, to a *possibility of forgery*, but nothing at all of that kind *prov'd*; a *possibility of corruption*, but *no one material* corruption, interpolation, or omission *pointed at*, which has not been *discover'd*, and consequently, *being known*, can be of no disservice to Christianity; and at this rate *all the writings* of antiquity may be forg'd, or corrupted; 30000 *various readings*, the common fate of books that have been *often transcrib'd*, but none of them shewn to be of such moment, as to *disguise*, or *alter*,

any important doctrine of the Chriſtian religion: ſo that they would ſignify nothing, if they aroſe *to twice that number.*

BUT there are ſeveral things that make it highly improbable, notwithſtanding the inclination of ſome of the firſt Chriſtians to *pious frauds*, that there are any important *alterations* and *corruptions* in the books of the *New Teſtament:* and theſe, I make no doubt, will have great weight, ſince there is nothing but *bare ſuſpicion* on the other ſide. We have no *direct reaſon* to think they are corrupted, and ſeveral very *conſiderable probabilities* that they are not. And if theſe are ſufficient to ſatisfy a *fair inquirer*; eſpecially, if the copies of the *New Teſtament* are found to be as *pure* as thoſe of *other* antient writings which are *depended* upon, and are not thought to be ſo perverted in any particular paſſages as to create *confuſion*, or at all to hinder, but that the *general ſenſe* of them may be eaſily underſtood; it matters not, whether, according to preſent *eſtabliſh'd forms*, they would be admitted as evidence in *a court of judicature.* For it may be great *perverſeneſs* and *folly* in private perſons, in the common affairs of life, and, I think likewiſe, with reſpect to *religion*, in which, as it is the moſt important concern of mankind, *probabilities* ought always to determine, not to believe things, and form their conduct accordingly upon ſuch *proofs*, as may not (perhaps for wiſe reaſons) be

be allow'd to decide in the *administration of public justice.*

THE only question in short is this, whether men ought not to be guided by *real probabilities*, without *inquiring* at all, how far they are admitted in some particular circumstances; and whether such probabilities may not be sufficient to *convince* the judgment of their own minds, as will not sometimes pass in *courts of judicature?* If this be denied, mankind must in most cases sit still, *believe* nothing, and *do* nothing; they must drop their most *laudable* and *useful* designs; and all the great affairs of the world will be *at a stand.* And if it be allow'd, (and nothing in the world, I think, can be more plain) the next thing to be consider'd is, whether, the authority of the books of the New Testament being already establish'd, there be not a *sufficient probability* to persuade us, that they are convey'd down to our times so *pure* and *uncorrupt*, as that all Christians may from thence get a *perfect idea* of the Christian doctrine? If this likewise be proved, the necessary consequence from the whole will be, that it is highly reasonable for us to receive them as the rule of our religious behaviour, when we can advance nothing to the contrary but *possibilities*, and *ill-grounded suspicions*; and that the methods of *courts of judicature* (which insist frequently upon *clearer proof*, than is necessary barely to convince men of the *truth*

of facts) ought to have no *influence* or *weight at all* with us, in the preſent inquiry.*

BUT to come more directly to the point. Let us examine if there be really any ground to ſuſpect that the text of the *New Teſtament* is ſo *corrupt*, as to render its authority precarious and doubtful; or whether *all appearances* do not rather favour the contrary ſuppoſition. And,

* I thought what is offer'd above a ſufficient anſwer to the author of *Chriſtianity*'s reaſoning from the practice of *courts of judicature*, and therefore did not trouble myſelf to examine any farther; but I have ſince been inform'd by a very ingenious friend, who is thoroughly acquainted with the methods of proceeding in theſe courts, that 'tis a great miſtake to ſay, that they "will not admit of a copy, tho taken from the original, without oath made by a diſintereſted perſon of his having compar'd it;" and that the true ſtate of the caſe is this. Where the original is extant, or there is a perſon living who has compar'd the copy with the original, a court of juſtice will expect, either that the original itſelf be produc'd, or elſe the oath of the perſon, who has compar'd the copy with it, that he believes it to be a true one; and that for this very good reaſon, becauſe ſuch proof *may be had*. But in caſes, where it appears that the original is *loſt*, as by fire, or any other accident; or where a deed is of ſuch *great antiquity*, as that it may reaſonably be ſuppos'd to be loſt; and a copy is produc'd of ſuch antiquity, that none who could be witneſſes to the *comparing it with the original* can be ſuppos'd to be living; ſuch copy is conſtantly admitted as evidence, without *any oath of its having been compar'd*. So that (as he adds) our author's argument, drawn from the practice of courts of judicature, can never ſerve his purpoſe, unleſs the original writings of the New Teſtament were *ſtill extant*, or at leaſt had been in being ſo very lately, that ſome perſons, *now alive*, might be ſuppos'd to have compar'd our preſent copies with them; but as the caſe really ſtands, is monſtrouſly abſurd, ſince it requires what is, in its own nature, *impoſſible*, ſuppoſing the preſent copies to be perfectly *genuine* and *exact*.

WHEREAS the author of *Christianity* &c. insinuates, that the writings of the *New Testament* are not much to be depended on, because they have been *so often transcrib'd*; it may be replied, that some of the copies we *now* have are of great *antiquity*, particularly the *Alexandrian*, which was made so early as the *fourth century*, and so might be taken from *some* at least of the *originals* themselves, which, *Tertullian* says, were to be seen in his time; or else, from *copies* that were taken *directly* from the originals. However, let what will come of this, we have as good presumptive proof of the *integrity* of these writings as can reasonably be desired.

FOR if we look into the books themselves, we shall find one *uniform consistent scheme* throughout the whole; the same entire *harmony* and *agreement* in all the parts, as might be expected, if they were *carefully* and *faithfully* transmitted down to our times; and none of those *contrarieties*, and *clashing accounts* of facts or doctrines, as must have been unavoidable to a *great degree*, if they had been alter'd and perverted in *material passages*. And,

BESIDES this *internal* mark of purity, which, upon the supposition of gross corruption, is not to be accouted for, there are several other circumstances, that, taken *all together*, afford a very considerable *probability*; *viz.*

viz. that theſe books were, from *the beginning*, read in *all* Chriſtian aſſemblies; and frequently quoted by the *earlieſt* Chriſtian writers; that *many copies* of them were taken, and diſpers'd in *various* parts of the world; and that they were very ſoon tranſlated into *ſeveral languages:* ſo that if we ſuppoſe that *ſome* copies might be corrupted, we cannot believe that the corruption could be *univerſal*, without inſinuating, what is too *mean* and *ſcandalous* to ſerve any cauſe, that the *whole* Chriſtian world concurr'd in the cheat. We ought rather to argue (as being a more *juſt*, as well as charitable and generous way of reaſoning) that as all honeſt men are greatly concern'd for the purity of religion upon which their *higheſt intereſts* depend, 'tis utterly improbable ſuch a thing could be effected; and to increaſe the *improbability*, let it be conſider'd, that there were different ſects of Chriſtians who *narrowly watch'd* each other, and would have been ready to *detect* and *expoſe* all impoſtures of this kind; or if it was poſſible, that when the Chriſtians had got the *temporal power* into their hands, that party which was *uppermoſt* might *corrupt* ſome copies, and *deſtroy* all the reſt; beſides, that this is but barely *poſſible*, but not at all *credible*, conſidering the *great number* of copies that were diſpers'd every where, and the variety of *tranſlations*; a thing of this nature could not have happen'd without being *loudly* complain'd of; it muſt have put the whole Chriſtian world in an *uproar*, and given the enemies of Chriſtianity a

vast *advantage* against it; some account of which, as of other confusions and disturbances in the church of *less moment*, would undoubtedly have been preserv'd in *some* or *other* of the writings of those ages which are *still extant*, compos'd by men of *different parties*, and *interests*.

AGAIN, we know that some corruptions have been *detected*, which confirms the main of the preceding argument, and shews clearly, that there was far from being an inclination among Christians, *universally*, to countenance and support such *base* and *knavish* designs; and the same *honest* disposition, the same *capacity*, and *diligence*, would probably have discover'd and expos'd *all* such frauds. And,

FINALLY, our present copies *agree*, in all points of importance, with all the most antient *versions*; and with the *numerous quotations* that were made from the books of the New Testament by the most *early* Christian writers. So that upon the whole, we have *stronger evidence* of their purity, than we can have with respect to any other books of *equal antiquity*, in which, it was not so much the concern of all virtuous persons to prevent *corruptions*; which are not *quoted* by so many other authors; and of which *copies* and *translations* were not so frequent, nor so *widely* dispers'd.

BUT notwithſtanding all theſe ſeeming probabilities, is there any arguing againſt *plain fact?* Are there not "30000 various readings in the copies of the *New Teſtament*, as it ſtands at preſent?" not to mention, "innumerable copies that have been loſt, which, no doubt, had their different readings*" alſo. And does not this prove great *unskilfulneſs* or *negligence* in the tranſcribers at leaſt, if not *wilful corruption?* To this ſeveral things are replied, *viz.* that the various readings rather tend to *ſettle* the true text, than *confound* and *pervert* it;—— that thoſe writings, of which there are the *feweſt copies*, are the moſt *corrupt* of any, and cannot be *amended*;—that there have been more copies and tranſlations of the *New Teſtament* than of any other antient book whatſoever, and conſequently, it is reaſonable to expect there ſhould be *more variations*;—— but that in proportion to the *number*, there are full as many differences in the copies of the *pureſt authors* of antiquity;—— and that the moſt *corrupt copies* we have are, in all eſſential points, ſufficiently exact to give men a juſt notion of Chriſtianity, and conſequently to anſwer the end for which thoſe writings were originally deſign'd. But let us hear what is ſaid upon this head by one, who will be allow'd to be as *accurate* a judge in controverſies of this kind, as any age has produc'd.

* *Chriſtianity* &c. *p.* 324.

" IF (ſays this moſt learned author) there " had been but one manuſcript of the *Greek* " Teſtament, at the reſtoration of learning " about two centuries ago; then we had had " no *various readings* at all. And would the " text be in a better condition, than now we " have 30000? So far from that; that in " the beſt ſingle copy extant, we ſhould have " had hundreds of faults, and ſome omiſſions " irreparable. Beſides that the ſuſpicions of " fraud and foul play would have been in- " increas'd immenſly.

" IT is good therefore, you'll allow, to " have more authors than one; and another " MS to join with the firſt would give more " authority, as well as ſecurity. Now chuſe " that ſecond where you will, there ſhall be " a thouſand variations from the firſt; and " yet half or more of the faults ſhall ſtill re- " main in them both.

" A THIRD therefore, and ſo a fourth, " and ſtill on, are deſirable; that by a joint " and mutual help all the faults may be mend- " ed: ſome copy preſerving the true reading " in one place, and ſome in another. And " yet the more copies you call to aſſiſtance, " the more do the various readings multiply " upon you: every copy having its peculiar " ſlips, though in a principal paſſage or two " it do ſingular ſervice. And this is fact, not

" only

" only in the New Teſtament, but in all an-
" tient books whatever.

" 'Tis a good providence, and a great
" bleſſing, that ſo many manuſcripts of the
" New Teſtament are ſtill amongſt us; ſome
" procur'd from *Egypt*, others from *Aſia*,
" others found in the *Weſtern* churches: for
" the very diſtances of places, as well as
" numbers of the books, demonſtrate that
" there could be no colluſion, nor altering,
" nor interpolating one copy by another, nor
" all by any of them.

" In profane authors (as they are called)
" whereof one manuſcript only had the luck
" to be preſerv'd, as *Velleius Paterculus* a-
" mong the *Latins*, and *Heſychius* among the
" *Greeks*; the faults of the ſcribes are found
" ſo numerous, and the defects beyond all
" redreſs, that notwithſtanding the pains of
" the learneſt and acuteſt critics for two
" whole centuries, theſe books are ſtill, and
" are like to continue a mere heap of errors.
" On the contrary, where the copies of any
" author are numerous, though the *various*
" *readings* always increaſe in proportion;
" there the text, by an accurate collation of
" them made by ſkilful and judicious hands,
" is ever the more correct, and comes nearer
" to the true words of the author.

" Terence is now in one of the beſt
" conditions of any of the claſſic writers;
" the

" the oldeſt and beſt copy of him is now in " the *Vatican* library, which comes neareſt " to the poet's own hand; but even that has " hundreds of errors, moſt of which may be " mended out of other exemplars, that are " otherwiſe more recent, and of inferior va- " lue. I myſelf have collated ſeveral; and " do affirm, that I have ſeen 20000 various " lections in that little author, not near ſo " big as the whole *New Teſtament*: and am " morally ſure, that if half the number of " manuſcripts were collated for *Terence* with " that niceneſs and minuteneſs which has been " uſed in twice as many for the *New Teſta-* " *ment*, the number of the *variations* would " amount to above 50000.

" IN the manuſcripts of the *New Teſtament* " the variations have been noted with a reli- " gious, not to ſay ſuperſtitious exactneſs. " Every difference in ſpelling, in the ſmalleſt " particle or article of ſpeech, in the very " order or collation of words without real " change, has been ſtudiouſly regiſtred. Nor " has the text only been ranſack'd, but all " the antient verſions, the *Latin Vulgate*, " *Italic*, *Æthiopic*, *Arabic*, *Coptic*, *Armenian*, " *Gothic*, and *Saxon*; nor theſe only, but all " the diſpers'd citations of the *Greek* and " *Latin* Fathers in a courſe of 500 years. " What wonder then, if with all this ſcru- " pulous ſearch in every hole and corner, the " varieties riſe to 30000? when in all anti- " ent books of the ſame bulk, whereof the

" MSS

" MSS are numerous, the variations are as " many, or more; and yet no verſions to " ſwell the reckoning.

" THE editors of profane authors do not " uſe to trouble their readers, or riſk their " own reputation, by an uſeleſs liſt of every " ſmall ſlip committed by a lazy or ignorant " ſcribe. What is thought commendable in " an edition of ſcripture, and has the name " of fairneſs and fidelity, would in them be " deem'd impertinence and trifling. Hence " the reader not vers'd in antient MSS is " deceiv'd into an opinion, that there were " no more variations in the copies, than what " the editor has communicated. Whereas, " if the like ſcrupulouſneſs was obſerv'd in " regiſtring the ſmalleſt changes in prophane " authors, as is allow'd, nay, requir'd in ſa- " cred; the now formidable number of 30000 " would appear a very trifle.

" 'TIS manifeſt, that books in verſe are " not near ſo obnoxious to variations, as proſe: " the tranſcriber, if he is not wholly igno- " rant and ſtupid, being guided by the mea- " ſures; and hindred from ſuch alterations, " as do not fall in with the laws of numbers. " And yet even in poets, the variations are " ſo very many, as can hardly be conceiv'd " without uſe and experience. In the late " edition of *Tibullus*, by the learned Mr. " *Broukhuiſe*, you have a regiſter of *various* " *lections* in the cloſe of that book; where

" you

" you may see at the first view that there " are as many as the lines. The same is visi- " ble in *Plautus*, set out by *Paræus*. I my- " self, during my travels, have had the op- " portunity to examine several MSS of the " poet *Manilius*; and can assure you, that " the variations I have met with are twice as " many as all the lines of the book.—Add " likewise, that the MSS here used were few " in comparison: and then do you imagine, " what the lections would amount to, if ten " times as many (the case of Dr. *Mill*) were " accurately examin'd. And yet in these " and all other books, the text is not made " more *precarious* on that account, but more " certain and authentic.

"—If a corrupt line, or dubious reading " chances to intervene, it does not darken " the whole context, nor make an author's " opinion, or his purpose, *precarious*. *Terence*, " for instance, has as many variations, as any " book whatever in proportion to its bulk; " and yet with all its interpolations, omis- " sions, additions, or glosses (chuse the worst " of them on purpose) you cannot deface " the contrivance and plot of one play; no, " not of one single scene; but its sense, design, " and subserviency to the last issue and con- " clusion, shall be visible and plain thorough " all the mist of *various lections*. And so it " is with the sacred text; make your 30000 " as many more, if numbers of copies can " ever reach that sum: all the better to a

" knowing and ſerious reader, who is there-
" by more richly furniſh'd to ſelect what he
" ſees genuine. But even put them into the
" hands of a knave or a fool: and yet with
" the moſt ſiniſtrous and abſurd choice, he
" ſhall not extinguiſh the light of any one
" chapter, nor diſguiſe Chriſtianity, but that
" every feature of it will be the ſame *." I make no doubt but that the reader will eaſily excuſe this long quotation, as it ſets the matter of the *various readings* in ſo clear a light, and ſhews that there is not the *leaſt difficulty* in it; though at the ſame time, he muſt be at a loſs what to think of the *fairneſs* and *modeſty* of thoſe writers, who without being able, or pretending to be able, to confute any part of it, ſtill go on in the *old track*, and think to bear down all before them by *confident* and *groundleſs inſinuations*.

THE author of *Chriſtianity* (among the reſt) has not ſaid one word to all this; only he ſeems to think it not ſufficient, becauſe " one or two various readings [in the New " Teſtament] where moſt things are own'd " to be of the greateſt moment, may be " of that conſequence, as to deſtroy the de-" ſign of the whole book †." To which I anſwer, that *may-be's* go for nothing at all; and that it would be time enough to reply to this, when he has produc'd any readings of

* *Remarks on a diſcourſe of Free-Thinking, by* Phileleutherus Lipſienſis; *p.* 64——68. *and p.* 76. *edit.* 5*th.*

† P. 325.

ſuch

such *great consequence.* However, to shew that there is nothing in the objection, let it be consider'd, that *various readings, which destroy the whole design* of revelation, must be such as pervert some *essential* doctrines of it. Suppose then, that in *two*, or *three*, places, the text of the New Testament was so *corrupted* as to assert, " that God is not wise, just and good; " that Jesus is not the Christ; that men " might practise idolatry; or deceive, and " persecute each other; or that there is no " future state," and the like; such readings could not, and ought not to be admitted as the *true readings*, contrary to the *general* and most *evident strain* of the revelation: but every one would naturally look upon them as the *errors* of transcribers, and not as the *original words* of the writers, to whose sentiments they not only bear no *resemblance*, but are a manifest *contradiction.* And indeed if we judge otherwise, 'tis impossible for us to find the sense of *any author* whatever. So that if men reason fairly, and as they ought to do, *one* or *two various readings* cannot *destroy the design of the whole* New Testament; because readings of that *importance* being directly contrary to the *plain* and *unquestionable design* of it, it must be as probable, as a thing of that nature can be, that they are *false readings.*

But admitting the credibility of the gospel-history to be sufficiently establish'd, and that we have all the probability we can de-

ſire, that the books of the new Teſtament are convey'd down to us pure in all material paſſages, how can the common people upon rational grounds be ſatisfied of theſe things? " Religion either does not concern the ma- " jority, as being incapable of forming a " judgment about it; or it muſt carry ſuch " internal marks of its truth, as men of " mean capacity are able to diſcover: or elſe " notwithſtanding the infinite variety of re- " ligions, all who do not underſtand the ori- " ginal languages their traditional religions " are written in, which is all mankind, " a very few excepted, are alike bound " in all places to pin their faith on their " prieſt, and believe in men, who have an " intereſt to deceive them; and who have " ſeldom fail'd to do ſo, when occaſion " ſerves.

" CAN people, if incapable by their rea- " ſon to diſtinguiſh truth from falſhood, " have any thing more to plead for the " truth of their religion, than that they be- " lieve it to be the true religion; becauſe their " prieſts, who are hir'd to maintain it, tell " them it was a long while ago reveal'd to " certain perſons, who, as they, on their " *prieſtly* words, aſſure them, were too wiſe " to be impos'd on themſelves; and too ho- " neſt to impoſe on others: and that no " change could have been made in their re- " ligion in after-times; the care men have of

" their

" their own souls, as well as their natural " affection for posterity, obliging them from " generation to generation, to hand down " their religion just as they receiv'd it: and " that it was morally impossibe innovations " should creep in, since it would be the " highest folly in any to attempt to introduce " new doctrines, as a tradition receiv'd from " their ancestors; when all must know they " had receiv'd no such tradition. As this is " all, the bulk of mankind, if they are not " capable of judging from the doctrines them- " selves of their truth, can say for their re- " ligion; so they, in all places, make use of " this argument; and with equal confidence " aver, that, though all other traditionary " religions are full of gross falshoods, and " most absurd notions, which their priests " impudently impose on them as divine " truths; yet our own priests are such faith- " ful representers of things, that one may " as well question the truth of all history, " as the truth of things believ'd on their " authority.

" THIS boasted argument, in which men " of all religions so much triumph, if it " proves any thing, would prove there ne- " ver was, nor could be any false religion, " either in whole, or part; because truth be- " ing before falshood, and mens ancestors " having once possess'd it, no change could " afterward ever happen: whereas on the " contrary, though there have been at times

" great numbers of traditional religions, yet " as far as it appears, no one of them has " long remain'd the ſame; at leaſt, in ſuch " points as were merely founded on tradi- " tion.

" I SEE no middle, but that we muſt " either own, that there are ſuch internal " marks fix'd to every part of the true reli- " gion, as will enable the bulk of mankind " to diſtinguiſh it from all falſe religions; " or elſe, that all traditionary religions are " upon a level: ſince thoſe, who, in every " country, are hir'd to maintain them, will " not fail to aſſert, they have all external " marks; ſuch as *uninterrupted traditions*, " *inconteſted miracles*, *confeſſion of adverſaries*, " *number of proſelytes*, *agreement among them-* " *ſelves*; and all thoſe other external argu- " ments, that the *Papiſts* and *Mahometans* " ſet ſo high a value on. In this caſe, what " can the common people do, who under- " ſtand not a word of the language, their " religion, and its external proofs are writ in, " but be of the religion in which they are " educated; eſpecially, if nothing is ſuffer'd " to be publiſh'd, which may, in the leaſt, " tend to make them queſtion its truth; and " all other religions are repreſented as full of " the groſſeſt abſurdities *." Now in anſwer to this, which I have not abridg'd, that the

* *Chriſtianity* &c. *p.* 232, 233, 234.

reader

reader may see this author's reasoning in its *full strength*, I observe,

THAT the defenders of revelation have no reason to assert, that *a traditional religion* is to be receiv'd upon the mere foot of *authority*; but there are certain *internal characters* absolutely necessary in order to its being a divine revelation, which *men of mean capacity are able to discover*. For instance, the principal design of all *reveal'd* religion must be to restore and establish *natural*; to give mankind *just* and *worthy* notions of God, and ascertain the principles and obligations of *morality*; and to promote the true rational *perfection* and *happiness* of human nature: and all its *positive institutions*, and *peculiar doctrines*, it is reasonable to expect, will be intended as helps and motives to virtue. In general therefore the people are capable, by their *reason*, of judging whether any particular traditional revelation be worthy of God; they are not requir'd to believe it *implicitly* even upon the authority of *miracles*; and consequently, *a tradition of miracles* is not all they have to urge in support of it.

BUT the proving that the *peculiar doctrines* of revelation are not repugnant to reason, nor unworthy of God, is only an argument that they *may* be true, and not a sufficient foundation upon which to conclude they are *really* true. Here then comes in the attestation of the miracles, to convince mankind that what

their reaſon approves, as *worthy* of God, *actually proceeds* from him. And therefore it muſt be own'd, that the common people cannot rationally believe the truth of any traditional revelation, that contains doctrines which reaſon *could not diſcover*, unleſs they can have full ſatisfaction, that the hiſtories they have of ſuch doctrines, and of the miracles wrought in confirmation of them, are *authentic*, and *credible*. So that the queſtion to be reſolv'd is in ſhort this; whether, as they are capable of diſcerning the *internal marks* of the truth of Chriſtianity, they are not likewiſe able to form a rational judgment concerning the *credibility* of the goſpel-hiſtory, and its *conveyance* down to our times without any material *alteration*, or *corruption*.

If the common people can judge of *ſuch kind* of proofs (as *unconteſted miracles* muſt eſtabliſh the truth of any doctrines that are agreeable to reaſon, and adapted to advance true goodneſs, and which belong to what is upon the whole a moſt *uſeful* and *perfect* ſcheme of morality; and conſequently againſt which, as very fit to be parts of a *divine revelation*, no objection of weight can be form'd) they may have *ſufficient* reaſon to believe the traditional religion in which they are educated; though there are not "ſuch internal "marks fix'd to every part of *it*, as *alone* "*will* enable them to diſtinguiſh it from all "falſe *religions*." It will indeed have this *general internal mark to diſtinguiſh it from all falſe*

false religions, that the *wise* and *beneficent* design of its author will plainly appear in the whole frame of it, and that even its *peculiar principles* will stand the test of reason; but though they may be such as reason cannot condemn, and which, if true, must have a considerable influence upon our moral conduct, 'tis most evident (as has been already hinted) that this of itself does not prove they are true: so that something, besides *internal marks*, may be absolutely necessary to establish the credit of a revelation that is *worthy of God*; or in other words, of a revelation, which, after the strictest inquiry, we may apprehend it to be *agreeable to his perfections* to communicate to mankind. And farther, if the bulk of mankind are able to judge of the *authenticness* and *credibility* of antient histories, it must be a great mistake of the author of *Christianity* &c. that if such "internal marks are not fix'd to every part "of the true religion, as will enable them "to distinguish it from all false religions, all "traditionary religions are upon the level." For let "those, who in every country are "hir'd to maintain them, be ever so confi-"dent in asserting, that they have all external "marks; such as *uninterrupted traditions*, "*incontested miracles*, *confession of adversaries*, "*number of proselytes*, *agreement among themselves*, and all those other external argu-"ments, that the *Papists*, and (as he says) the "*Mahometans* set so high a value on;" the *common people* being able, as will presently be shewn,

ſhewn, upon a view of what is offer'd on *both ſides* of the queſtion, to diſtinguiſh between *true* and *falſe* pretences, are no more under a neceſſity of being impos'd upon, or of embracing a *traditional religion* implicitly, than they are of believing without evidence in points of the moſt *pure* and *abſtract reaſoning*, which do not at all depend upon tradition.

ALL this *ſhew* of argument therefore is plainly founded upon the ſuppoſition, that the generality muſt take a traditional religion entirely from the *authority* of their *prieſts*, and that this is all they have to plead for the truth of it: but as we have only the author's bare aſſertion for this, it will undoubtedly go for nothing. It muſt paſs however for a ſpecimen of a very *extraordinary* kind of reaſoning, firſt to lay it down as a fundamental principle, that if men are incapable by their reaſon, without the teſtimony of miracles, to diſcover every part of a traditional religion, " all who do not underſtand " the original languages their traditional re- " ligions are written in, which is all man- " kind, a very few excepted, are alike bound " in all places, to pin their faith on their " prieſts;" and to think this ſufficiently prov'd by asking, what " they can have more to " plead for the truth of their religion, than " that they believe it to be true, becauſe their " prieſts tell them *ſo and ſo*;" and then upon ſuch a ſlender foundation to declare, that " all

" all traditionary religions are upon a level;" and that the common people have nothing to do " but to be of the religion in which they " are educated." The consequence would indeed be just, if the premises were true; but there happens unluckily to be this great defect, that the premises, which are the very things in dispute, are *taken for granted*; and that the author of *Christianity* &c. seems to take the putting a question *how* a thing *can be*, to be an argument that *it cannot be*; which, it must be allow'd, is a very *expeditious* and *easy* way of deciding all controversies,

I PROCEED now to answer the question directly, how the *common people* may be persuaded of the truth of facts, the knowledge of which depends upon *tradition*; of the *authenticness*, for instance, of the books of the New Testament, the *credibility* of the accounts contain'd in them, and that they have not suffer'd any material alteration in the *conveyance*. That this is the truth of the case has been largely proved; the only thing therefore that remains to be shewn is, that the people are capable of seeing this proof. And what is it that is necessary in order to this? Why only, that they have *proper materials* upon which to form a right judgment, and a *capacity* of judging upon those materials.

TO obtain the first, let them set themselves to examine the truth of Christianity with

with an *honest*, *attentive*, *impartial* mind, and read carefully what is offer'd on both sides, *for it*, and *against it*; and then, if what has been hitherto written is *sufficient* to determine the controversy, they must know all that is necessary to be known, in order to the making a *rational* judgment about it. Upon this supposition they know as much as the *writers themselves*, who may be presum'd to have deliver'd their sentiments in the *fullest* and *strongest* manner they were able; and consequently have as *extensive* a view of the subject, as men of learning, and much superior improvements. Nor is it necessary to their attaining *sufficient skill* in this controversy, that they read every thing which has been written upon it, or may be written hereafter, (which would be too *laborious* and *voluminous* an inquiry for the generality of mankind, an inquiry that their *opportunities* and *circumstances* in life would not perhaps admit of) for as the subject has been often handled, there are scarce any two writers of note but contain all that is *material*. Thus far then, I think, the case is very plain, *viz.* that if the dispute can be decided by what the learned have written, and consequently by what they *know* about it, the *common people*, who by reading may be furnish'd with all their ideas, must be able to form as rational a judgment; provided the point itself to be determin'd be not above their *capacities:* Nay, 'tis not at all absurd to suppose, that they may often make *a truer judgment*; because they may pursue

purſue their inquiries with minds more free from *prejudice*, and better diſpoſed to allow every argument its *proper weight* than thoſe, who, with their greater abilities, have too frequently ſtrong attachments to a *particular ſcheme*, make it their buſineſs to *puzzle* and *confound* what they cannot anſwer, and diſpute not for *truth* but *victory*.

Now what is there in the preſent caſe, that is above the *capacity* of the bulk of mankind? Are not all, who will exerciſe their reaſon and examine impartially, able to judge, upon a view of the arguments on *both ſides*, whether the books of the New Teſtament are prov'd to be *forgeries*; or whether it be prov'd on the contrary, that they were *conſtantly aſcrib'd* to the authors whoſe names they bear; that they are ſupported by the ſame *undiſputed tradition* as other antient writings which are univerſally allow'd to be *genuine*; and conſequently, that the rejecting them as *ſpurious* deſtroys the authority of all antient hiſtories, which ſtand upon *no better foundation?* If they are unable to judge, upon having the *whole evidence before them*, whether theſe, which are plain *matters of fact*, are prov'd or no, they can judge of *no facts* whatever. And what confuſion would ſuch a notion of the common people occaſion, if it was brought into *civil life*.

And if the people can judge of the proofs which are offer'd for the *authenticneſs* of the books

books of the New Teſtament; it will ſure be trifling with the underſtandings of men to attempt to ſhew, that they are able to judge when it is ſufficiently prov'd that hiſtorians are *credible*, and whether the objections which are made againſt their teſtimony are ſtrong enough to *ſet it aſide*. For being convinc'd that theſe accounts were written by *eye-witneſſes*; if they cannot judge whether it be prov'd, that *eye-witneſſes* in the relation of ſuch facts could not, conſidering all circumſtances, *be impoſed on themſelves*; and that they were men of ſuch *integrity* (demonſtrated by the general courſe of their behaviour, by their atteſting theſe things in oppoſition to their worldly intereſts, and chuſing ALL not only to ſuffer, but die, rather than retract their teſtimony) as cannot rationally be ſuſpected of a deſign to *impoſe on others*; I ſay, if they are incapable of judging when this is *fully* prov'd, the conſequence will indeed be, that they ought never to believe any thing upon *teſtimony*, and what would become of the world if this was true? All commerce between man and man muſt immediately be ſuſpended, and the deſign of their ſocial nature be entirely defeated.

THE ſame may be ſaid with reſpect to *corruptions*; the common people muſt be capable of diſcerning, when they ſee what is offer'd on *both ſides*, whether this charge is prov'd or not; whether any inſtances of groſs cor-

corruption are *produced*, and clearly shewn to be such, or the whole of what is advanc'd be only *surmise* and *conjecture*, contrary to all the *probabilities* of things; otherwise, they cannot be judges of probability in *any case*; and consequently, considering in how few of the affairs of life *higher evidence* can be had, their reason must be in a manner *useless*.

So far am I in my judgment from thinking it of service to the Christian religion, that the liberty of writing against it should be at all *restrain'd*, that I would have it *encourag'd* to the utmost; and cannot think of a better method to fix even the *vulgar* more firmly in the belief of the gospel-history, than reading the objections of its adversaries. This, I am persuaded, will give a *greater weight* to the arguments which are urg'd to establish its authenticness, credibility, and purity, in the most excellent *defences* of Christianity. Let them read, for instance, *Christianity as old as the creation*, &c. or any other book where the same things are said in a much narrower compass, and when they find, instead of *direct proofs* of forgery with respect to the writings of the New Testament, only groundless *suspicion*, and *insinuations* that there *may be* forgery, and that none of the writers on this side of the question are so hardy as to *pretend*, that the *authenticness* of far the greatest part of them was ever disputed in the most early ages; when they find what trifling things are objected

objected against the *capacity* and *integrity* of the gospel-historians, and how they *strain* and *rack* their invention to raise difficulties, which, after all, amount to nothing but to destroy the credibility of the most *unexceptionable testimony*, and make men distrust their *very senses*; and that as there is nothing of moment urg'd against the *authenticness*, and *credibility* of the books, there is not the least probable evidence given that they are corrupted in any *material* branches of Christian doctrine, nor *a single corruption of consequence* pointed at, but what was before discover'd by the honesty and diligence of *Christian writers*, which is a strong presumption that these writings are, in general, *pure* and *entire*; and finally, when they find, that all the stir which has been made about *various readings* comes to no more than this, that there are *the same differences* in the copies of the New Testament as are to be found in the copies of the purest authors of antiquity; and that there is not so much as an attempt made to prove, that these differences are of any *great importance* (only perhaps they *may be*, but *these writers themselves* do not take upon them to say they *are)* or that they *obscure*, *disguise*, and *pervert* any essential doctrine of the Christian revelation; when, I say, the people find, that this is *all* the most *ingenious* and *subtil* opposers of Christianity have to offer against its authority, *(*which is indeed *nothing more* than may be urg'd against the authority of all antient books*)* they *will*, and ought to conclude,

that its great facts stand upon so *sure* a foundation as cannot be *shaken*. 'Tis natural for them to reason thus, that if any thing *more material* could be advanced, men of their *skill* would undoubtedly be able to produce it; and they cannot imagine that 'tis for want of an inclination to make a *home thrust*, that they deal in *possibilities* instead of *direct* and *positive proofs*, but because they know they have *no other arguments* to make use of. The people can have no ground to suspect, that the adversaries of their religion have any more important objections *in reserve*, than those which they have already urg'd. For tho the terror of *penal laws* (which are but weak supports of a *false* religion, and unnecessary to guard the *true*, that being never so well defended, as when it is left to make its way by the force of *its own evidence*) I say, tho the terror of *penal laws* may restrain them from making a *direct* and *open* attack upon Christianity, which is the establish'd religion; experience teaches us, that they are not at a loss for ways, in which to say the *freest things* both against the miracles, and doctrine, of Christ and his Apostles. And it may be justly question'd, whether by this *artful insinuating* method, in which there is more room for *evasion*, and men cannot be kept so strictly to the rules of *close reasoning*, they have not done more prejudice to the Christian cause, than they could, had they been allowed to throw off all *disguises*, and argue *professedly* against it; and consequently, whe-

ther this be not the method they *chooſe* to proceed in? But be that as it will, it can't be expected that the people ſhould *ſuſpend* their belief of reveal'd religion, till they are ſure no more objections *can*, or *will* be made to it: for at this rate they can fix on nothing, but muſt indulge to eternal *ſcepticiſm*. It is not their buſineſs to concern themſelves about what may *one time*, *or other*, or perhaps *never*, be offer'd; but to be determin'd by the evidence they have. And therefore if Chriſtianity, upon a ſerious examination of the reaſons on *both ſides*, appears to their minds to be a *rational* inſtitution, and ſupported by *ſufficient* evidence, they ought to believe and ſubmit to it; and continue to acknowledge it as a *divine* religion, till theſe *ſtronger arguments*, if any ſuch there be, are produced, and convince their judgments of the contrary.

THUS have I ſhewn, that the common people, if they will give themſelves time to *read*, and *conſider*, need not take the Chriſtian revelation *implicitly* from their anceſtors, or their prieſts; but are capable of diſcerning both the *intrinſic goodneſs* of the doctrine, and its *external proofs*. It muſt be own'd, that the difficulty is much greater with reſpect to thoſe perſons who *cannot read*, or want proper *opportunities* and *advantages* for making inquiries of this kind themſelves: but however, even *theſe* are ſo far from being, univerſally, under a neceſſity of *implicit faith*, that *very many* of them, at leaſt, may, if they

they will, form their judgment upon a *rational conviction.* Of the *intrinsic excellency* of a revelation they are all judges; and in order to judge of its *external proofs*, let them find out a person that is *well skill'd* in this controversy, and of whose *veracity* they are well assured (and such an one, it cannot be denied, but many of the most *ignorant* and *illiterate* vulgar, if they exercise the same *care* and *prudence* as they would in chusing a person, to advise and manage for them in the common affairs of life, may *easily* find) and let him lay before them fairly and impartially *the substance* of the argument *on both sides*, upon which they may maturely *deliberate* and *determine.* 'Tis evident, that in this case they do not take the judgment of another about a point of *speculation*, but only his representation of a *matter of fact:* they do not trust to his *understanding*, but his *integrity.*

IF it be said, that they trust his *understanding* so far, *viz.* to give them a judicious state of the argument in its full strength: I answer, that the People may indeed make a *wrong* choice; but, as I hinted before, if they are sincerely desirous to be rightly inform'd, there are *vast numbers*, to whom it will be no great difficulty to pitch upon a person whose *capacity* cannot be disputed; so that there will be but little danger of their being *imposed* on, if they can rely upon his *honesty.* However, for their greater security they may

apply to *ſeveral*, and try how far their accounts *agree*. And let it but be allowed, that perſons who have ſuch *opportunities*, and act with that *prudence* and *caution* which the importance of the inquiry deſerves, may have as *good reaſon* to be ſatisfied in this caſe, as they have in other matters of the greateſt moment, wherein they depend upon the information of men of *known abilities*, and *unqueſtionable veracity*, we deſire no more. For this ſuppoſes, that they may have a *ſufficient probability* of the truth of the Chriſtian religion; ſuch a probability as leaves no rational ground of *doubt*; and which it is always, and juſtly, thought their *wiſdom* to be determined by, in all other affairs of conſequence. After all it muſt be own'd, that this method may be attended with *ſome difficulties*, but, I think, not with greater than men often meet with, and get *ſucceſsfully* through, in the management of their ſecular concerns; and with reſpect to thoſe who cannot inquire *for themſelves*, and likewiſe want opportunities to get *proper information* from others, I make no ſcruple to allow, that their belief of a traditional revelation muſt be *implicit*; but yet it may be of great uſe to them, if they have frequent opportunities to hear it *read* and *explain'd*, by fixing in their minds the principles of *natural religion*, and giving them ſuch juſt notions of *morality*, as, 'tis probable, they would never have attained by their own *private reflections*.

I HAVE all along taken it for granted (becauſe it is the true and natural ſtate of things which God deſigned) that the common people will *read*, and conſider, and make uſe of *thoſe helps* which are in their power, in order to underſtand the proofs of the truth and purity of a *traditional* religion. And 'tis *ſufficient*, that if they do this they may form a rational judgment of theſe points; and as much as can be ſaid with reſpect to *natural religion* itſelf. For let the religion of nature be ever ſo plain to the *diligent* and *impartial* inquirer, men will as neceſſarily be ignorant of *that*, if they are *indolent*, *careleſs*, and *unthinking*, if they *neglect* the uſe of their reaſon, or ſuffer it to be darkned by *ſuperſtition* and *prejudice*, as of the evidences of an *external revelation*. The knowledge of the *one* is no more to be obtained without proper reflection, than of the *other*; and a careful examination will diſcover *both*. Nay, I can't help thinking, and appeal to every man who has made obſervations on the world, that the meaneſt of the people will judge more eaſily of the proof of *matters of fact*, and the *credibility* of *teſtimony*, than of *abſtract* and *cloſe* reaſonings even upon *moral* ſubjects.

IF it ſhould be objected, that 'tis not probable that *the bulk of mankind*, conſidering their education, circumſtances, the influence of ſenſible objects, how little they are uſed

to reaſoning, and how much their thoughts are engaged by the neceſſary buſineſs and cares of life, will *think* and *examine:* I anſwer, that then they muſt take the conſequence, which is, that they will have no *certain rule* at all of their actions, and know as little of the *laws of reaſon*, as of the *true grounds* of *revelation*; ſo that this proves no more againſt *a ſtanding revelation* being a proper means of inſtructing them in their duty, than againſt *reaſon itſelf*. And though it ſhould be allowed, that in countries where *free debate* is diſcouraged, and forbidden under ſevere penalties, and the people are obliged to take their accounts both of *a revelation*, and its *proofs*, from certain particular perſons authorized and maintained for that purpoſe, they can have no more reaſon to believe even a *true traditional revelation*, than others may have for believing a *falſe one*; this, I apprehend, does not in the leaſt affect the preſent argument, becauſe it is purely *accidental*; and ſuch accidents, in the preſent ſtate of the world, while men are *ambitious*, *deſigning*, and *intereſted*, and apt to *impoſe* upon their fellow creatures whenever they have it in their power, are *unavoidable*.

THE juſt ſtate of the queſtion is, whether revelation be not, *in itſelf*, a proper rule for the generality of mankind, a rule, of which (when things are as they ought to be) they are *able to judge*; whether they cannot

not discern both its *intrinsic goodness*, and *external proofs* though depending on *tradition*. As it has been already shewn that they are capable of this, must it not be perverse in any to insinuate, that it was not *fit* for God to communicate it, because the wise and gracious design of it happens to be in a great measure defeated by the *wickedness* and *craft* of some, and the *slavish implicit* submission of others? The Christian revelation was undeniably of great use when it was first published, in reforming the corrupt sentiments and manners of the world; and let it prevail now as far as it can *rationally* (particularly in those blessed nations of light and liberty, where *far the greater part* of the people may be judges upon what foundation it stands) and it will continue to be of *eminent* advantage. I shall only add, that if in some countries the common people are so *inslaved*, and kept in such *ignorance*, as to be hardly capable of judging fairly of the proofs of a *traditional religion*; by the same methods of *imposition* and *restraint*, by grafting *superstition* upon their *fears*, and an artful management of their *credulity*, their *natural notions of good and evil* have been abominably, and almost universally corrupted to such a degree, that it was not reasonable to expect, without an *extraordinary* assistance, that they would ever recover themselves out of their degenerate state, to the knowledge and practice of the true *religion of nature*. Of this the old Heathen world, and, if we can cre-

dit modern accounts, Heathen nations at this day, are moſt *notorious* and *flagrant* examples.

I KNOW but of one difficulty that lies againſt what has been ſaid under this head, which has not been already obviated, *viz.* that the ſame exerciſe of *reaſon*, the ſame *thought* and *impartial inquiry*, which is neceſſary to enable men to ſee the true grounds of a *traditional religion*, will diſcover *all the principles of natural religion*, without a revelation. What advantage is there then in a *ſtanding revelation*, above mens being left to the mere light of *reaſon*? To which it will be *ſufficient* to give this ſhort anſwer, that allowing what this objection ſuppoſes to be true, it does not at all affect any part of the preceding argument; my buſineſs being only to prove, againſt the author of *Chriſtianity* &c. who aſſerts the contrary, that the common people are able to judge of the truth and purity of a *traditional revelation*, without concerning myſelf at all with the debate, whether they might, or might not, *by the ſame pains and care*, attain to a complete knowledge of the *religion of nature*. However, I ſhall add farther, that as this does not render an external revelation in any degree leſs *uſeful*, when the reaſon of mankind is in fact *corrupted* and *darken'd*; it has likewiſe, when men are upon rational grounds convinc'd of the truth of it, theſe two great advantages, as a *ſtanding guide*, beyond the ſole

direction of natural light; that it furnishes a more *uniform*, *consistent*, and *universal* rule of duty, than could reasonably be expected, considering mens different capacities, humours, prejudices, and the like, if every one was left to *form a scheme of morality for himself*; and affords *stronger motives* to the practice of virtue, particularly by assuring us of the *eternity* of future rewards, which to mere reason is at best *obscure*, and *doubtful*.

'TWILL be needless to make remarks on this author's account of the *external proofs* of a traditional revelation; because though he affirms it is *all* that can be said, the reader, I make no doubt, after what has been so largely offer'd upon this head, will think it such an *imperfect* and *partial* representation, as could not be given but by one, who either had not *thoroughly considered* the argument, or chose to urge it so *weakly* that he might the more easily *triumph*. Let me only observe, that it is so far from being the *whole* of the argument against *innovations* in a traditional religion, "that it was morally impossible innovations should creep in; the care men "have of their own souls, and their natural "affection for posterity, obliging them from "generation to generation, to hand down "their religion just as they received it;" and, "since it would be the highest folly "in any to attempt to introduce new doctrines, as a tradition receiv'd from their "ancestors; when all must know they had

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" receiv'd no ſuch tradition," this, I ſay, is ſo far from being the whole of the argument, that 'tis really one of the moſt *minute* and *inconſiderable* branches of it: the improbability of *innovations* and *corruptions*, with reſpect to the Chriſtian revelation, ariſing, as I have ſhewn, almoſt entirely from *particular circumſtances*, and *plain facts*, which ſtrongly intimate the contrary. And therefore his anſwer to *this boaſted argument*, as he calls it, (though I know of none that uſe it as an argument *of itſelf*, much leſs that *triumph* in it) if it might paſs as ſufficient, were the argument urged in a general way, and the ſtrength of the cauſe reſted upon it, whether the tradition was *written*, or *oral*, and whatever was the ſtate of the world; when it is mentioned only as a *collateral* circumſtance, confirming other probabilities upon which the *chief ſtreſs* is laid, is *weak* and *trifling*.

THERE is another objection ſtill behind, which the author of *Chriſtianity* &c. frequently urges, *viz.* that if the common people could be ſatisfied, upon rational grounds, of the *authenticneſs*, *credibility*, and *purity* of the books of the New Teſtament, yet, conſidering that the meaning of words is *perpetually changing*, the *difference* of languages, and the *peculiar ſtyle* and *manner* in which theſe books are written, they are a rule not much to be depended on; nay, a rule that's very *unſafe* and *dangerous*, unleſs the people mend and improve it by their *reaſon*; as tending

tending to give them *false* and *dishonourable* notions of God, and of the methods of his *moral providence*, and lead them into great mistakes with respect to *morality*. " None, " who consider how differently the circum- " stances of human affairs, which are con- " tinually changing, affect men; but must " see 'tis scarce possible, that the doctrines " which were originally taught, or the prac- " tice originally us'd in any institution, should " long continue the same; nothing being " more easy than to vary the signification of " words *.—— Had there been but one " language, and a book writ in that language, " in indelible characters, (so that there could " be none of those thirty thousand various " readings, which are own'd to be crept into " the New Testament) and all could have " access to it; yet even then, considering how " uncertain the meaning of words are; and " the interest of designing men, to put a " wrong sense on them; it must be morally " impossible this religion could long continue " the same.†—— In short, there are scarce " any words in any one language, except of " such things as immediately strike the senses, " that are adequately answer'd in another, so " as exactly to comprehend the same ideas; " and if the ideas are only fewer, or more, " what confusion may not that occasion? " how great and frequent must the mistakes " then be, in translating the antiquated

* *Christianity &c. p.* 286. † Page 288.

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" languages of people, who liv'd at a vaſt " diſtance of time, as well as in countries far " remote; and affected hyperbolical, para- " bolical, myſtical, allegorical, and typical " ways of expreſſing themſelves, as oppo- " ſite to the uſage in other parts, as *Eaſt* is " to *Weſt?* and not only this, but it will be " likewiſe neceſſary to have an accurate " knowledge of their manners, cuſtoms, tra- " ditions, philoſophy, religious notions, ſects, " civil and eccleſiaſtical polity; of all which " the common people know as little, as they " do of the original languages; who having " very obſcure and incompetent conceptions " of the principal words and phraſes uſed " in the verſions, their religion muſt needs be " a very odd jumble of confuſed and incon- " ſiſtent notions, were it to depend on words, " and their preciſe meaning; and not on the " things themſelves and their relations, which " are plain and obvious to common capaci- " ties; they would be in a manner entirely " govern'd by ſounds *.—— Should the " chance of education throw men into the " true traditionary religion, yet conſidering " its ſtyle is not very exact, there being gene- " rally more expreſs'd than is meant; and " things of the greateſt conſequence are often " ſo treated, as that men can't from thence " perceive the nature and extent of their du- " ty; and even precepts of the greateſt mo- " ment are ſometimes ſo far from being de-

* P. 290.

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" liver'd plainly and ſimply, that they are " expreſs'd after a general, undetermin'd, " nay, hyperbolical manner; ſo that even in " this caſe, there's a neceſſity for the com- " mon people to have recourſe to the reaſon " of things †."

Now in anſwer to this I obſerve,

1. THAT what is here ſaid *in general* about " the changing ſenſe of words, and difference " of languages," affects *all antient books* as well as the writings of the New Teſtament; and muſt prove, if it proves any thing, that they cannot be tranſlated into *modern* languages, ſo as to give an unlearned reader a juſt notion of the deſign and meaning of the authors even in the *plaineſt* paſſages, or upon the moſt *common* and *intelligible* ſubjects; nay, that they cannot be underſtood by the learned themſelves (for if they may be *underſtood* 'tis moſt certain they may likewiſe be *tranſlated)* and conſequently that the ſtudy of dead languages, and of all the valuable remains of antiquity, is perfectly *uſeleſs* and *trifling*. The very ſame things may be ſaid with reſpect to the old *Heathen moraliſts*, which the writers of our author's ſtamp pretend to *underſtand*, and likewiſe to *tranſlate*; that " conſidering " how uncertain the meaning of words *is*, it " muſt be morally impoſſible *the ſenſe of them* " could long continue the ſame;" and " that

† P. 236.

" there

" there are ſcarce any words in any one lan-
" guage, except of ſuch things as immedi-
" ately ſtrike the ſenſes, that are adequately
" anſwered in another, ſo as exactly to com-
" prehend the ſame ideas; and if the ideas
" are only fewer, or more, what confuſion
" may not that occaſion?" But though this would be eſteemed *ridiculous* enough if applied to common authors, it muſt paſs for very *good ſenſe* when urged againſt revelation; and why, when the nature of the thing is the ſame? Truly, for no cauſe but becauſe they will have it ſo, as it is neceſſary to ſecure a *favourite* point, that muſt by no means be dropt. Is not this trifling with the name of *reaſon*, and moſt egregious *partiality*, and *inconſiſtency*?

ADD to this, that the ſenſe of the words uſed in the *original writings* themſelves is *now*, juſt what it was when the books of the New Teſtament were *firſt written*; becauſe it is a *dead* language, and conſequently has not undergone that *flux*, and thoſe *variations*, to which *living* languages, in a long courſe of time, may be ſubject.

BUT is there not great difficulty " in
" tranſlating an antiquated language, that a-
" bounds with hyperbolical, parabolical, my-
" ſtical, allegorical, and typical ways of ex-
" preſſion, as oppoſite to the uſage in other
" parts, as *Eaſt* is to *Weſt*?" Without doubt, what difficulty there is muſt ly *entirely* here;

and if the author of *Christianity* &c. had treated this part of the argument with that *good judgment*, which he shews himself to be master of upon some other occasions, he would have insisted *only* on this; and not have said so much about "the various signi-"fication of words, the difficulty of fixing "their meaning, and expressing the same "thing so, as to convey the same ideas in "different languages," the consequence of which, how *plausible* soever it may seem, is really, that all antient authors are *unintelligible*; and that all attempts to give just translations of them, and express their true sentiments in a modern language, so that persons, who want either capacity, or opportunity, for consulting the originals themselves, may read and understand them, are *idle* and *romantic*. Now in order to remove this objection let it be consider'd,

2. THAT these writings, the obscurity of which is so much complain'd of, were *chiefly* and *more immediately* design'd for the use of that age in which they were *composed*; when figurative expressions were *easy* and *familiar*, and parables and allegories *usual methods* of instruction. The moral precepts of our Saviour, and the doctrines which he taught in person, being *all* deliver'd, either in public discourses to the men of *that generation*, or in private instructions to his *disciples*, 'tis natural to expect the *common phrases*, *idioms*, and *peculiar ways of expression*, that were then

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in uſe; nay indeed, the *uſual forms* of ſpeaking were the moſt proper way of communicating his ſentiments to thoſe with whom he convers'd; and it would have look'd odd, if one man ſhould have attempted to frame *a new language*, or if he had avoided thoſe *peculiarities*, by which the language of the country, where he was born and educated, was *diſtinguiſh'd* from that of other nations. And the ſame may be ſaid of writings, which we always find to be in that *ſtyle*, and *manner*, which generally prevailed in the places where they were firſt publiſhed.

But beſides that the books of the New Teſtament were intended *primarily*, and *more directly*, for the benefit of that age (as all books are that are publiſh'd in any age) and conſequently muſt be written in the *language*, *ſtyle*, and *manner of expreſſion*, that was moſt *familiar* both to the writers and readers; beſides this I ſay, it may be obſerv'd more particularly, that ſeveral of them are only *occaſional*; and were written either at the requeſt of particular perſons, which perhaps was the caſe of St. *Luke*'s *goſpel*, and *the Acts of the Apoſtles*, both inſcrib'd to *Theophilus*; or elſe, upon ſome *ſpecial incidents* that occur'd, and requir'd that the apoſtles ſhould interpoſe, and give directions both to private chriſtians, and whole churches. And certainly 'tis moſt unreaſonable to expect, in ſuch writings, any other than the *common phraſes*, and *idioms*, that were then in uſe in *thoſe parts* of the world,

world, how different soever from the languages of other countries, and especially from the genius of *modern languages*. So that 'tis a mistake of the author of *Christianity* &c. that "precepts relating to morality are de-"liver'd in the New Testament after an ob-"scure manner, when they might have been "deliver'd otherwise :*" This, I say, is plainly a mistake in the sense he intended it, *viz.* That there is an *affected obscurity* in the moral rules laid down in the gospel; because the manner of writing therein used was, all circumstances consider'd, by far the most *natural*; a way that the writers themselves had always been *accustom'd to*; and which took, *most generally*, among the persons directly concern'd.

THE inference I would draw from all this is, that the books of the New Testament, though they may be *obscure* to us at this distance, might, notwithstanding the *figures*, *parables*, and *proverbial* expressions that are frequent in them, be a very *plain* and *easy* rule of morals to the age when they were written, and for whose use they were chiefly and more immediately design'd. For as words are *arbitrary signs* of *ideas*, *figurative* and *proverbial* ways of speaking, or writing, when they are the common turn of a language, may have as certain and determinate a mean-

* *Christianity* &c. *p.* 27.

ing as the moſt *plain* and *ſimple* expreſſions, and convey preciſely the *ſame ideas* to *all*: otherwiſe, all the *antient eaſtern languages* (as well as the *modern* which abound very much in *ſtrong figures*) muſt have been abſolute jargon and confuſion, and could not anſwer the end of language. To which we may add, that the *obſcurity* of ſome parts of the New Teſtament, to us, may ariſe from the general method of *epiſtolary writings*, in which there is a peculiar conciſeneſs; and frequently dark hints, and references to facts, and cuſtoms; or to paſſages in the letters to which they are an anſwer; all which was perfectly underſtood by thoſe to whom they were directed. This I take, conſidering the *time* when, and *the perſons* for whom it was *more immediately* written, to be a complete vindication of the *ſtyle* of the New Teſtament; and a ſufficient proof, that notwithſtanding the *parables*, and the *proverbial* and *figurative* expreſſions that are uſed in it, it might be a *clear* and *intelligible*, and moſt *uſeful* ſyſtem of religion and morality.

But our author has a text againſt this, being very dextrous at quoting ſcripture againſt its own *authority*, and *ſufficiency* *, viz. "That *without a parable* Jeſus *ſpake not to* "*the multitude* †; and for this remarkable "reaſon, *that ſeeing they might ſee, and not*

* *Chriſtianity* &c. *p.* 332. † Matt. xiii. 34.

"*per-*

" *perceive*; *nnd hearing they might hear*, *and* " *not underſtand*; *leſt at any time they ſhould* " *be converted, and their ſins be forgiven them* *."
By which he would inſinuate, that our Saviour made uſe of parables on purpoſe to make his diſcourſes *unintelligible* to the bulk of the people; and for fear leſt they might have been prevailed upon, if he had delivered his doctrine more *plainly*, to forſake their *evil courſes*, and be *happy*. A very ſtrange deſign indeed in one that pretended to be *a teacher ſent from God*; and that it was the chief end of his miſſion *to call ſinners to repentance*.

To ſet this matter in a juſt light let it be conſider'd, that parables were *common* methods of inſtruction among the *Jews*; and that our Saviour, in conformity to the *cuſtom* of the age and nation in which he lived, ſometimes uſed them by way of *illuſtration*, to inculcate important and uſeful principles in a more *ſtrong*, and, at the ſame time, a very *plain* and *familiar* manner. Parables of this kind, as that of the *rich man* and *Lazarus*, of the *Phariſee* and *Publican*, and ſeveral others, were *eaſily* and *univerſally* underſtood. Nor was it likely that any inconvenience would follow upon uſing *parabolical* ways of expreſſion, when they were *common*; becauſe all the people knowing that there was *one grand point* purſued, would attend *only* to that; and not

* Mark iv. 12.

be apt to *ſtrain* every circumſtance, which was added to maintain the *propriety* and *decorum* of the parable, and render the whole repreſentation *conſiſtent* and *beautiful*; or extort *myſteries* from it, which were not in the intention of the ſpeaker. So that 'tis moſt evident, that the view of *Jeſus*, when he ſpake in parables, was not always to *diſguiſe* his ſentiments; and much leſs to wrap himſelf up in ſuch *impenetrable darkneſs*, that the people might not underſtand, nor conſequently receive any benefit from his diſcourſe; but on the contrary, to aſſiſt their *apprehenſions*, and repreſent the great principles of religion, and moral obligations, both in a more *eaſy* way, and with greater *ſpirit* and *force*.

But then it muſt be own'd, that at other times, when he apprehended that the truths he was about to deliver would give great *offence*, he made uſe of parables to *conceal* his deſign in ſome meaſure, that it might not appear *all at once*, and provoke the *paſſions* of his hearers. And in my opinion, this is ſo far from being a reflection upon his conduct, that it ſhews the great *wiſdom* and *tenderneſs* of this divine teacher; and that he ſtudied the moſt *effectual methods* to promote the great end of his miniſtry, the reformation and happineſs of mankind. For what good purpoſe could it poſſibly ſerve, to ſpeak ungrateful and offenſive truths *openly* and *bluntly*; which, being contrary to mens prepoſſeſſions and prejudices, would naturally *irritate* and *inflame* their

their minds? There is a great deal of *art* and *addreſs* neceſſary in dealing with the multitude; eſpecially in a perſon who would correct *epidemical* vices, and remove their *favourite*, moſt *ſacred*, and *venerable* prejudices. In ſuch caſes, falling upon the point directly will infallibly harden the *vicious*, the *deſigning*, and *intereſted*; and perhaps ſo far engage the paſſions even of the more *honeſt* and *ingenuous* in the debate, as to hinder the *cool* and *impartial* exerciſe of their reaſon; and by this means, not only fruſtrate the good effect of our endeavours to reclaim them, but render their errors more *incurable*. Whereas, if we inſinuate things in ſuch a way that perſons ſhall not *immediately* ſee our deſign, and conſequently in a way that gives no *ſudden* provocation, nor *alarms* their prejudices; though they do not underſtand our meaning at firſt, yet afterwards the *teachable* and *well-diſpos'd*, in their private *calm* and *deliberate* reflections, will very probably diſcover what was intended; and be convinced likewiſe of its reaſonableneſs and importance; and ſo receive great benefit by it. And as for thoſe who are inſlaved to *evil habits*, and prejudic'd in favour of their *vices*, 'tis no matter whether they underſtand it or no; becauſe while there is ſuch a *perverſe* temper of mind, there is ſcarce any hope of their being *reform'd*; and the *plaineſt* and moſt *important* truths are likely to have little or no influence upon them.

Now that this is the whole of what is meant in that passage of St. *Mark*'s gospel, which is cited by the author of *Christianity* &c. is evident from all the circumstances of the history, as it is related by the *Evangelists*. The sense, which he insinuates, is in itself so very *strange*, *improbable*, and *unaccountable*, considering the great *benevolence* of disposition, and ardent desire to *instruct* and *reform* the world, which our blessed Saviour always discover'd, that 'tis hard to conceive how any *fair* and *candid* reader can imagine it to be the *true* sense; but besides, it will soon appear that it really is not. For what is express'd by St. *Matthew* thus, *All these Things spake* Jesus *unto the multitude in parables, and without a parable spake he not unto them* *; is explain'd by St. *Mark* just in the manner I am speaking of, *And with many such parables spake he the word unto them, as they were able to hear it; but without a parable*, i. e. as the connection necessarily requires, because they could not *bear* a more *free* and *undisguis'd* way of talking, *spake he not unto them* †. And exactly parallel to what is here said, are our Saviour's words in the 11th and 12th verses. *And he said unto them*, [i. e. to the twelve] *unto you* [who have humble, honest, well dispos'd minds] *it is given*, or allow'd *to know the mystery of the kingdom of God; but to those that are without* [and are under the

* Mat. xiii. 34. † Mark iv. 33, 34.

power of strong prejudices] *all these things are done in parables; that seeing they may see, and not perceive, and hearing they may hear, and not understand*; i. e. because such could not bear a *plain* and *naked* representation of the truth, it was necessary that the light of it should be somewhat *clouded*, and veil'd under *parables* and *allegories*, that it might not offend their *weak* minds, which were corrupted and perverted by the force of *prejudice*, and the prevalency of *irregular passions*. The phrases, *that seeing they may see, and not perceive, and hearing they may hear, and not understand*, mean no more than if it had been said, *because seeing they see not*, &c. *and hearing they hear not*, &c. and therefore it is actually express'd thus in St. *Matthew*'s account of the same discourse, which may be consider'd as a *comment* upon St. *Mark*'s shorter history, and is a *clear and full* explication of it. *Therefore speak I to them in parables, because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of* Esaias, *who saith, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand, and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive. For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes have they clos'd; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their hearts, and should be converted, and I should heal them* *.

* Matth. xiii. 13, 14, 15.

ADD to all this, that the *darkeſt* of Chriſt's parables might be underſtood, with reſpect to their general deſign and tendency at leaſt, by an *attentive* and *conſiderate* hearer; which is a plain proof, that though they might be very proper to *ſoften* and *palliate* his meaning, when prudence requir'd it, they could not be deſign'd to render it *unintelligible*, or even *difficult to find out*, to perſons who gave themſelves time for cool reflection and examination. And therefore we are told by St. *Mark*, that when his diſciples inquir'd about this very parable of *the ſower*, which occaſion'd the diſcourſe we have now been conſidering, he ſeem'd to *wonder* at their ignorance, and ſaid, *Know ye not this parable* †? And again, when they aſked him the meaning of another of his parables, *Are ye alſo yet without underſtanding* ‡? By which he intimated, that it was not ſo much the *obſcurity* of the parables themſelves, as their own *dulneſs*, and want of *thought*, that made them not perceive the import of his doctrine.

IT will be aſked however, whether, allowing the books of the New Teſtament, notwithſtanding the *figurative*, *parabolical*, and *proverbial* ways of expreſſion with which they abound, to have been *plain* and *intelligible* in the age when they were firſt written; their meaning be not very *obſcure* and

† Mark iv. 13. ‡ Mat. xv. 10.

un-

uncertain, especially to the common people, in these remote times; when such forms of speaking are *strange* and *unusual?* And consequently, whether they are not very improper to be recommended as a *standing rule* of religion and morality, since 'tis likely they will lead the people into great mistakes even about the *perfections* and *providence* of God; and the moral directions contain'd in them are so *dark* and *confus'd?* Undoubtedly all this must be allow'd, if the scheme which the author of *Christianity* &c. proceeds upon be true, *viz.* that the common people are to make no use of their *reason* in interpreting the sacred writings, but to be govern'd entirely by *sounds*. But what *need* of such a supposition? Do the *advocates* for revelation assert and maintain this? On the contrary, is it not granted by all, that it is the *sense* of these authors, and not their *words barely*, that we are concern'd about? And should not the *same care* be taken in order to understand their meaning, as is necessary with respect to other writers?

'TWILL be sufficient therefore to my present purpose to shew, that the books of the New Testament are so *plain*, as, in all ages, to answer the *great design*, for which, if they are a divine revelation, they must have been *originally* intended; —— that the common people, if they will think, and make any use at all of their reason, may *easily* learn from them all the *essential* doctrines of the Christian religion;

religion;—— that notwithstanding the peculiar *style* and manner in which they are written, they are calculated to give them *the justest notions of God*, and a *plain*, as well as *perfect*, *rule of morality*, inforc'd by the most *rational* and *powerful motives*;—— that 'tis not the *natural consequence* of their using *figures*, *parables*, *allegories*, and the like, if any fall into errors about important principles of religion and virtue, because there is a *sufficient guard* against all such abuses to every common reader, but owing to *accidents* which, in the present state of the world, are *unavoidable*, let the rule of action be upon the whole *ever so plain*;—— and that what difficulties there are, as it must be own'd there will be difficulties after all, are such as the bulk of mankind need not much *concern* themselves with, in order to answer the wise and gracious intention of God in communicating the *Christian revelation*. And in order to shew that this is really the case, I have several things briefly to offer. Let it be observed therefore,

3. That *figurative*, *allegorical*, *proverbial* expressions *&c.* do not *necessarily* render the meaning of a book, even in those very passages, obscure, and hard to be understood. For in *parables*, and *allegories*, the general design and drift of the writer, and the main point he had in view, may be *clear* and *obvious* to every one, that reads him with the least attention. And 'tis not unreasonable to suppose,

pose, that our Saviour's parables, in particular, may be more intelligible to the common people *now*, than to those to whom they were *first* deliver'd; because they have *his own explications* of some of them; and others, those, for instance, which represented the *then future* swift and extensive progress of the gospel among the *Gentiles*, may be much *plainer* since that wonderful event happen'd, to which they are so *easily accommodated*, than they were to the body of the *Jews*, whose notions and prejudices in this particular point *darken'd* their understandings in some measure, and hinder'd them from apprehending, so soon as they might *otherwise*, the true intent and meaning of them.

And all that can be inferr'd from the use of *figurative* expressions in the New Testament is, that these books are not always to be taken *literally*. But what then? May it not be plain, when *figurative* ways of speaking are us'd, that they are *figurative?* And may not the sense of them be so *obvious*, that no reader of the least reflection can mistake it? Without doubt it may. Nay, the author of *Christianity* &c. in his labour'd collection, has given some instances of this kind, and instances, which are, in all reason, too *trifling* to be urged in so *grave* and *serious* an argument; as that *all the kings of the earth sought the presence of* Solomon *; *that if the things*

* 2 Chron. ix. 23.

which

which Jeſus *did were written, the world itſelf could not contain the books* †. For if, in the room of each of theſe paſſages, he could have produced a *thouſand*, it would ſignify juſt nothing; both as they are in themſelves of no *conſequence*, and do not in the leaſt affect the *general deſign* of revelation, nor any of its *important* doctrines; and becauſe the common people muſt *immediately perceive* that ſuch expreſſions are figurative (ſomewhat of a like nature being very uſual in languages, which have not, *generally*, ſo much of *amplification* and *hyperbole)* and never were ſo *ſtupid* as to underſtand them *literally*. But to come more directly to the main difficulty.

4. THOSE parts of the New Teſtament, which are expreſs'd in the moſt *plain* and *ſimple* manner, give a *complete* and moſt *rational* account of the perfections and providence of God, and a noble ſcheme of *morality*; ſo that the meaneſt of the people, without concerning themſelves at all with *figurative* and *proverbial* phraſes, *allegories*, *parables*, and the like, nay, if we ſuppoſe that they are not *capable* of underſtanding them, have an excellent ſyſtem of natural religion, recommended upon *more certain* principles, and inforc'd by *ſtronger* motives, than can be found in all the writings of the antient Philoſophers. And theſe plain accounts, the ſenſe of which is *obvious* and *eaſy* to all, are a good general

† John xxi. 5.

expli-

explication of all the *dark* passages, and a *sufficient guard* against errors of consequence, with respect to any grand point of religion and morality.

It will signify but little to say, that the people *actually mistake* figures, parables, allegories, *&c.* and are led into false notions by them. For if explaining *dark* passages in a book, which, it is generally believed, can contain no *contradictions* and *inconsistencies*, by such as are *clear* and *indisputable*, be the most *natural* method of interpreting it; a method which all who *think* must discern and approve of; and if the common people, provided they follow this method, and make any use of their *reason*, cannot be mislead by the *peculiar style* and *phrase* of scripture into unworthy conceptions of God, or mistake the general nature of true religion; all of which is most evident, and undeniable; it necessarily follows, that these books are upon the whole a *plain* and *useful* rule, and wisely calculated for the instruction of *the bulk of mankind.*

The question is not how they *do*, but how they *might easily* understand them, by the *common use* of their reason; their *indolence*, *carelessness*, and *prejudice*, is not the least objection against the *sufficiency* of the scripture-rule; because if they will not think *for themselves*, but resign their understandings and consciences *implicitly* to the direc-

tion and conduct of *others*, the plaineſt rule we can poſſibly conceive of will be no *ſecurity* againſt the moſt *abſurd* and *dangerous* errors. And accordingly, this is moſt notorious with reſpect to *reaſon*, which the author of *Chriſtianity* &c. and all the writers on the ſame ſide of the queſtion, magnify as a moſt *eaſy*, *ſure*, and *infallible* guide; that its *clearneſs*, *univerſality*, and *ſufficiency* to direct in matters of religion, have been no *preſervative* againſt the moſt extravagant ſuperſtition, and the vileſt corruptions of natural religion and morality. If therefore notwithſtanding thoſe *groſs abuſes* of it, it may, in *itſelf*, be a plain and obvious rule, ſo may *revelation*.

AND as for what our author objects againſt the method which I have propoſed, for underſtanding *dark* paſſages of ſcripture, or at leaſt, for preventing the common people from being led into any *great miſtakes* by them, that "if we can't depend on ſin-"gle texts; and where there are ſeveral, the "plaineſt are to carry it; the difficulty will "be to know which are the plaineſt; ſince "the different ſects of Chriſtians have ever "pretended that the plaineſt texts are on their "ſide; and wonder'd how their adverſaries "could miſtake their meaning *;" it is ſaying in effect, that there is no rule, *in the nature of things*, whereby to diſtinguiſh between

* P. 325.

what

what is *clear*, and what is *obscure*; or else, that be the difference, *in itself*, ever so discernible, the common people can form no judgment if there are *strong* and *bold* pretences on both sides, *i. e.* in truth, want a capacity to discern between *confidence* and *reasoning*. I cannot but take notice here, by the way, of the *inconsistency* of this writer's principles, when he has different points in view; for at some times, reason is *so plain a guide* to the common people, that they need nothing else to teach them the *whole* of religion, and prevent *all mistakes* about it; but at other, they are a *stupid herd*, destitute even of *common sense*, who can't distinguish between *plain* and *figurative* expressions, and are under a kind of *necessity* of understanding figurative and proverbial ways of speaking, parables, allegories, *&c. literally*; not only in opposition to the clearest dictates of *reason*, but likewise to the most express and positive assertions of *revelation itself*. This shews, indeed, that such persons have a very strong inclination to run down *reveal'd* religion: but makes it doubtful, whether they have any *fix'd* and *uniform* set of principles of their own, to offer in the room of it. Again.

5. 'Tis very *material*, and worth observing, that the generality of the common people do not, *in fact*, misunderstand a great number of the *figurative* and *proverbial* expressions used in scripture; and are not at a loss

loſs about the meaning of thoſe precepts, that are deliver'd " after a general, undeter- " min'd, nay, hyperbolical manner;" which ſhews, that ſuch a way of writing does not, *in the nature of the thing itſelf*, hinder, but that theſe books may, upon the whole, be a *plain* rule of conduct, fitted for the uſe of the *bulk of mankind*. I ſhall give ſeveral inſtances of this kind both from the Old and New Teſtament; confining myſelf chiefly to thoſe paſſages, which the author of *Chriſtianity* &c. has heap'd together as great *obſcurities*, and *general*, *confuſed*, nay *falſe* accounts of things, if taken *ſtrictly* and *literally*.

How few are there among the common people, who interpret thoſe paſſages according to the *letter*, which impute *bodily parts*, *human infirmities*, and *paſſions* to the Deity*? ſcarce one in a thouſand. The generality firmly believe, that God is an *infinite inviſible ſpirit*; and conſequently, that when he is repreſented as having *eyes*, *ears*, *hands*, and the like; as *ſitting upon the circle of the earth*†; *riding upon the wings of the wind*‡; and moving *from place to place* to obſerve the conduct of his creatures; this is only *accommodated* to our preſent conceptions, and expreſſing *abſtract* truths by ſuch ideas as are moſt *familiar* to the bulk of mankind; and therefore they take it to denote no more

* *Chriſtianity* &c. *p.* 251. † Iſa. 40. 22. Pſalm 18. 10.

than

than his *knowledge* and *power*, his *ſupreme majeſty, univerſal providence, particular care and direction of events, and narrow inſpection of the actions of men.* In like manner, when "God is repreſented for many days "together as viſible on *Mount Sinai**," the people generally underſtand it, not as if the *inviſible God himſelf* was ſeen, but of ſome *external glory*, the ſymbol and manifeſtation of his preſence. And thoſe *elegant* and *lofty* deſcriptions of the Divine being, with which the *poetical* parts of ſcripture, eſpecially, abound, have a natural tendency to ſtrike not only the *vulgar*, but more *philoſophical* minds, with the moſt *ſolemn awe* and *veneration* of him; and give the ſtrongeſt and moſt elevated ſentiments of his *power and providence*, which are figured with ſo much *pomp* and *magnificence*; and conſequently are of excellent uſe.

AGAIN, aſk the people whether *repentance* can *properly* be attributed to God, and they will anſwer almoſt *univerſally*, that *he is not a man that he ſhould repent*; and therefore, when repentance is aſcribed to him in the Old Teſtament, they do not underſtand it as if he had a *different judgment* of things, or was *ſorry* for any part of his conduct (and indeed cannot *naturally*, if they don't conſult their *reaſon* at all, take this to be the ſenſe of the revelation, becauſe there are other paſſages that abſolutely deny it†) but as a *figurative*

* *Chriſtianity* &c. P. 252. † Numb. 23. 19. 1 Sam. 15. 29. Rom. 11. 24.

 expreſ-

expreſſion denoting, that, in ſome particular caſes, *he acted like a perſon who really repented.* Thus, with reſpect to an inſtance which is mention'd by the author of *Chriſtianity* &c *. when God was highly diſpleaſed with the abominable corruptions and wickedneſs of mankind, he did, as far as was conſiſtent with his perfect wiſdom, *unmake* them again by cauſing a general deluge, and deſtroying the whole human race, eight perſons only excepted, who were ſaved to ſtock the world *a-new* with inhabitants; and in this acted as if he had *repented of having made man on the earth* †. Again, when he put by *Saul*'s family from ſucceeding to the crown of *Iſrael* after his deceaſe, and commanded the prophet *Samuel* to anoint *David* in his life-time; he acted as if he *repented that he had made* Saul *king* ‡. And thus likewiſe, when he is repreſented as *weary of repenting*; what can the common people, who generally believe that God can't *properly* repent, underſtand by this, but the very thing that was intended, *viz.* that inſtead of *ſuſpending*, or *removing* his judgments, which his prevailing inclination to mercy, and deſire of the reformation and happineſs of a guilty people, had inclin'd him to do in times paſt, as if he *repented* of the evil threatned; he was now determin'd, having found gentler methods to be ineffectual, and that they were *incorrigible* offenders, upon their *abſolute ruin*, unleſs they prevented it

* Pag. 251. † Gen. 6. 6. ‡ 1 Sam. 15. 11.

by

by a speedy amendment. This meaning of the phrase must have been so evident that none could mistake it, and consequently it would have appear'd, upon the first reading, to be nothing at all to our author's purpose, if he had only been so *ingenuous* as to quote the whole sentence, which runs thus; *thou hast forsaken me, saith the Lord, thou art gone backward: therefore will I stretch out my hand against thee, and destroy thee; I am weary with repenting* *.

FARTHER, when God is said to have *rested*, and to be *refresh'd*, after having finished his work of creation, the common people are not so *stupid* as to imagine, that he was so *fatigued* by hard labour as to need *proper* refreshment; but the *easy* and *obvious* idea convey'd to ALL by this expression is, "that "in six days God *ended* the creation of the "world, and was pleased with what his *om-* "*nipotence* had effected, as answering exactly "the *model* that was design'd by his infinite "*wisdom* and *goodness*."

THE same may be said as to other passages. For instance, when it is affirm'd, that God did things to *try* people; the vulgar, in general, know as well as this author, that a being, whom revelation in the most distinct and express terms, as well as reason, declares to be *omniscient*, could not do it for

* Jer. 15. 6.

his own information, but that the perſons *try'd* might have an opportunity to give an *unexceptionable* and *noble proof* of their virtue and integrity; which would be attended with very great advantages with reſpect to *themſelves*, by affording them a *ſtronger aſſurance* of their ſincerity, and conſequently the moſt *ſolid ſatisfaction* in a review of their conduct, and as it is the neceſſary tendency of *difficult* and *heroic* acts of virtue eſpecially, to ſtrengthen very much the *inward principles* and *habits* of virtue; and beſides it might be of ſingular uſe, as *a ſtanding example*, to animate and encourage others.

AGAIN, can it be ſuppoſed that any of the people, when God is ſaid *to ſwear in wrath**, imagine that he took *a raſh oath*, and ſware in *a paſſion?* Muſt they not be convinc'd from the books of the Old and New Teſtament themſelves, as well as by the reaſon of their minds, that this is *impoſſible?* The general conception that they form of it is, I make no doubt, that being juſtly diſpleaſed with the perverſe and ungrateful behaviour of the *Iſraelites* in the wilderneſs, and the many repeated affronts they had offer'd him, he declar'd in the moſt *ſolemn* manner, that, unleſs they *repented*, *they ſhould not enter into his reſt*†. Add to this, that the meaneſt of the people *univerſally* include in their notion of God, that he is the *ſu-*

* *Chriſtianity* &c. *p.* 250. † Pſ. 95. 11.

preme

preme being; and consequently, when they read of his *swearing*, are not in the least danger of taking in the *common idea* of an oath, *viz.* an invocation of, and appeal to, a *superior*. And why should the author of *Christianity* &c. mention this, when he knows it is not what the scripture means, when God is at any time said to *swear?* The real sense of scripture is certainly very *intelligible*, and *rational*; for the form of what it calls *God's oath* is, *as I live saith the Lord**, *i. e.* as sure as I *exist* such and such things are *true*, or *shall come to pass*. Now what exception is there in *reason* against this? or must we amuse the world with *idle cavils* about the propriety of *words*, when the thing intended by them is *easily* and *universally* understood, and intirely *just* and *defensible?* In this writer's notion of an oath, 'tis undoubtedly true that God *cannot swear*: and 'tis as undeniable, that there is not *a single passage*, either in the Old or New Testament, that so much as intimates he *ever did*; such objections therefore are *trifling* with mankind in the grossest manner, and a much greater discredit to *the persons that make them*, than to *the scriptures* against which they are urg'd. For the whole of what is said amounts only to this, that an *idea* is fix'd to a word, which the author of *Christianity* &c. does not think *proper*; *i. e.* which is not the usual acceptation of it *now*, though it might be very com-

* Ez. 33. 11. Heb. 6. 13.

monly uſed this way by the age when theſe books were *firſt written* (who, as words are *arbitrary*, had certainly a right, by *general conſent*, to fix what meaning to them they pleas'd;) but it cannot be pretended, that any real inconvenience could follow from it, becauſe the ſenſe of the word is ſo *clearly determin'd*, that none in *that age*, nor in *any age* of the world *ſince*, could *poſſibly* miſtake it.

In like manner, when God is ſaid "*to* "*hiſs*; and in one place *to hiſs for a fly that* "*is in the uttermoſt part of the river of* E- "gypt, *and for the bee that is in the land* "*of* Aſſyria*," there are ſcarce any of the common people that can be ſuppoſed to underſtand it *literally*; nor was there the leaſt likelihood that they would, either *in the age* when theſe writings were compoſed, ſuch ſtrong poetical figures being *then* very common and familiar; or *afterwards*, the *ſcriptures themſelves*, if they confine their inquiries there, giving the moſt exalted conceptions of the Deity, that human reaſon can form. On the contrary, the general ſenſe of this paſſage is ſo very *obvious*, that even a *ſuperficial* reader can hardly miſs of it (tho he may not perceive the *aptneſs* and *beauty* of the alluſion) *viz.* that the *meaneſt creatures* are ſubject to God's command; and that he makes uſe of them as the *inſtruments* of his

* *Chriſtianity &c. p.* 252. If. 7. 18.

wiſe

wise and righteous providence, to bring *desolation* on a sinful and degenerate people.

'Tis a mistake to imagine, that the *strict* and *literal* sense is always the most *obvious*, even to the *vulgar*. For when such actions are attributed to the supreme being, as are inconsistent with those plain accounts of his nature and perfections which *revelation* always inculcates, as well as with the notions that *reason* suggests; the *literal* sense is evidently *unnatural*. If therefore when God is said to *hiss*, none, who are not quite destitute of all reflection, can take it to be *literally* true; and if the thing intended by it be so *plain*, that all must immediately perceive it; what ill consequence can possibly follow from the use of such a *figurative* expression? 'Tis most certain, that in this passage of *Isaiah*, it is so far from having a tendency to mislead the generality of readers into *false* and *degrading* thoughts of God; that in its most *natural* sense, a sense which it is not conceivable *one* in *ten thousand* will mistake, it gives them a very strong and lively idea of his *universal* dominion and providence.

But if the author of *Christianity* &c. design'd to *burlesque* the phrase itself, as well as to represent it as very obscure to the common people, and likely to lead them into *low* and *unworthy* conceptions of the Deity; which seems indeed to have been his intention by his manner of *introducing* it; I think, to

ſpeak modeſtly, that he has not ſhewn any great *judgment*, or ſkill in *criticiſm*. For beſides that the general and obvious ſenſe of it, which the people cannot well miſtake, is *juſt* and *rational*; the *metaphor itſelf*, by which it is expreſs'd, is exceedingly *pertinent* and *beautiful*; intimating the *univerſal* command of the great creator, by his ſpeaking to the *loweſt rank of creatures, as it were, in their own language*; ſo that they as *readily* follow him as their leader, as beings of an higher order, who are directed by an *intelligent* and *rational* principle, and are always prepar'd to obey his *ſummons*, and execute the great deſigns of his *providence*. And was I to put an author into a method to make himſelf *completely ridiculous*, I would adviſe him to write a critic in the ſame manner upon *Milton's paradiſe loſt*, as is frequently practis'd with reſpect to *poetical paſſages of the Old Teſtament*; in which he would have an opportunity of ſhewing his *little wit*, by finding fault with ſeveral things even in this great poet's deſcriptions of *the Deity*, which cannot be *literally* true; but have been admir'd, however, by the greateſt *genius's* of the preſent age, both for the *ſublimity* of the *ſentiment*, and the *elegance* and *grandeur* of the *figuring*. In the mean time 'tis a moſt undeniable truth, that 'tis really as *abſurd* to cenſure beauties and elegancies in the *ſacred writings*, as in any common authors how much ſoever *applauded*, and *celebrated*; though, through the *partiality* of the age, it may not meet with equal

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diſcouragement. For mean and ſpiteful criticiſms are, in themſelves, never the leſs *contemptible* for being ſuffered to paſs in the world, and becauſe they are not actually received with that *contempt* they deſerve.

AGAIN, our author has thrown together ſeveral texts of ſcripture to prove *Moſes* to be a God; nay, *the Lord God* of the *Iſraelites*; in order "to ſhew (as he ſays) how little "we are to depend on words and phraſes;*" *i. e.* to ſhew what no body denies, that we are not always to underſtand them *literally*. But does this writer really believe, that any of the *meaneſt of the people* ever were, or ever could be, induc'd to think, if there had been twice as many texts of the ſame kind, that *Moſes* was "the eternal omnipotent "God, the maker of heaven and earth; who, "by his own immediate power, performed "all the wonders in *Egypt*, and brought the "*Iſraelites* out from thence?"

IF when *figurative* expreſſions are uſed, they will neceſſarily be underſtood by All (as in the preſent caſe) to be *figurative*, they can do no hurt, even though their preciſe meaning be *unintelligible* to the bulk of mankind. Let us ſuppoſe therefore, that the common people are not likely to find out the true ſenſe of *thoſe texts*; what will be the conſequence of ſuch a ſuppoſition? Will it follow, that the

* *Chriſtianity* &c. *p.* 331.

books

books in which ſuch paſſages are found are of no *authority?* or that they may not, notwithſtanding, be, upon the whole, a *plain* and *uſeful* rule of religion and morality? Not in the leaſt. For let the number of *mere unintelligibles* (by which I mean ſuch things, as *very many* of the common people, in *every age*, are not likely thoroughly to underſtand) be much greater than, I believe, it really is; if the books of the Old and New Teſtament give a *plain* and *rational* account of the perfections and providence of God, and *a good general ſcheme* of religion ſupported upon the beſt principles, and by ſtronger motives than *mere reaſon* can ſuggeſt; if this account may be *underſtood*, whether the deſign of *figures*, *parables*, &c. be ſeen or not; if there be *a ſufficient guard, in the books themſelves*, againſt all errors diſhonourable to God, or injurious to the practice of true piety and virtue; and the common people cannot fall into *miſtakes of this kind*, if they make any uſe of their reaſon, and follow the *natural* and *eaſy* method of explaining *dark* and *figurative* paſſages by ſuch as are *clear* and *determinate*; they are certainly of very great advantage as *a ſtanding rule*, and fitted for *general inſtruction and uſe*.

I HAVE hitherto put the worſt ſuppoſition that can be made, *viz.* that *a great part* of the people, in theſe *remote* times, are not likely to underſtand the meaning of thoſe texts relating to *Moſes*, and ſhewn that no ill con-

consequence can follow from it, because they never *did*, and 'tis utterly improbable they ever *will*, put that absurd sense upon them which our author insinuates; but, in reality, these passages have nothing of *difficulty* or *obscurity* in them, but are very *plain* and *intelligible* to every common reader. Thus, for instance, when we consider *Moses* as speaking in the name of God, there is not the least *harshness* or *impropriety* in *his promising rain in due season to such as keep his commandments* *; and to *Joshua*, that *he would be with him in carrying the people into* Canaan †; or, in his saying, that he did *great works*, yea, *miracles in the sight of the* Israelites, on purpose *that they might know that he was the Lord their God* ‡. Again, when *the Lord said to him, see, I have made thee a God to* Pharaoh, *and* Aaron *thy brother shall be thy prophet* **; the *obvious* meaning of the text, which immediately occurs to *ALL*, is, that God deputed him to act in *his name*, and give forth *his commands*, and appointed *Aaron*, because he was the better speaker, to be his *messenger* and *mouth* to *Pharaoh:* and therefore 'tis expressly said in another place, which may serve for a full explication of the passage we are now considering, that *Aaron* should be to him *instead of a mouth*, and he *to* Aaron *instead of God* ††. Farther, as God imploy'd *Moses* in bringing the children of *Israel* out of *Egypt*,

* Deut. xi. 13, 14, 15, *&c.* † Deut. xxxi. 23.
‡ Deut. xxix. 5, 6. ** Exod. vii. 1. †† Exod. iv. 14.——17.

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the ſame work might very juſtly, and according to forms of ſpeaking that are *common* in all languages, be attributed to *both*; to God as the *principal and immediate author* of their deliverance, and to *Moſes* as his *inſtrument*. As he was the *meſſenger* and *prophet* of God, and gave *ſufficient credentials* of a divine commiſſion, 'twas fit and neceſſary that the people ſhould *acknowledge* him under that character; and *believe in him*, as well as in *God* that ſent him. And the phraſe being *baptized into*, or *into the name of*, any perſon, as it is explained by St. *Paul* in that very epiſtle, in which he ſays, *figuratively* and *alluſively* only, that the *Iſraelites* were *baptized into* Moſes *, implies no more than this; that by the ceremony of *baptiſm* we give ourſelves up to his *conduct*, as one authoriz'd and appointed by God to be our *leader*; declare that we are his *diſciples*, and make a *public profeſſion* of that religion which God ſent him to publiſh †.

And whereas it is ſaid, that "*Moſes* is "pray'd to, under the appellation of *Lord*, "*to forgive ſin*;" the true ſtate of the caſe is this. In one of the paſſages referred to we are told, that God being diſpleas'd with *Aaron* and *Miriam* for ſpeaking againſt *Moſes*, ſmote *Miriam* with a leproſy: upon which *Aaron*, in a ſubmiſſive manner, begg'd of *Moſes* to forgive the offence they had com-

* 1 Cor. x. 2. † *See Ch.* i. 13, 14, 15.

mitted

mitted against him, as the person appointed by God to be their *commander* and *leader* (which was but a point of *justice*, and a *necessary reparation* of the injury he had done him,) and believing that *Miriam*'s cure depended on his prayer to God for her, desired him to *intercede* in her behalf. These words, *Alas, my Lord, I beseech thee, lay not the sin upon us, wherein we have done foolishly, and wherein we have sinned* *, can't possibly mean any thing else, in their *first* and most *obvious* sense, considering the character of the person who *supplicates*, and the notion he must necessarily have of him to *whom he petitions*; and no prejudice can *pervert* so *plain* a passage, but what would *obscure* and *darken* every thing; especially if we add what immediately follows, that *Moses*, instead of pretending to do any thing by an authority and power *inherent* in himself, *cried unto the Lord, saying, Heal her now, O God, I beseech thee. Let her not be as one dead* †.

THE other text I need but just set before the reader, to shew that 'tis entirely *impertinent*; *Then* Pharaoh *called for* Moses *and* Aaron, *and said, I have sinned against the Lord your God, and against you. Now therefore forgive, I pray thee, my sin, only this once; and entreat the Lord your God, that he may take away from me this death only* ‡. What

* Numb. xii. 11. † Numb. xii. 13.
‡ Exod. x. 16, 17.

cavilling

cavilling is here about the words, *ſin* and *forgiveneſs?* I cannot but think, that the author of *Chriſtianity* &c. has, in this affair, *ſinn'd* againſt all rules of *decency*, and ought *to pray to be forgiven*; or, in other words, to aſk pardon of the world, for this *extravagant trifling* with the common ſenſe of mankind.

IF it be ſaid, that texts of *this nature* have been *actually* urg'd to prove the *ſame point*, in one of the moſt *conſiderable controverſies* among Chriſtians: I anſwer, that I am as free to condemn that uſe of them *there*, as *here*; but this is nothing towards proving the main point, the *obſcurity* of ſcripture in *itſelf*. Nay, the *quite contrary* may rather be inferr'd from it. For as the *very ſame* ſort of texts are *univerſally* and *immediately* underſtood when they relate to *Moſes*; the reaſon why they are miſapply'd in any other caſe can't be the *obſcurity* of the texts themſelves, but it muſt be owing to ſome *accidental* prejudice.

LET us now conſider briefly ſome of the texts of the *New Teſtament*, which the author of *Chriſtianity* &c. fancies to be very *obſcure* and *confus'd*; and we ſhall find, that compared with other paſſages in which the ſame things are more largely explain'd, and with the general tenor of the Chriſtian revelation, they have a *natural* and *eaſy* ſenſe that can't well be *miſtaken*. The main of what he has

advanc'd

advanc'd upon this head is, really, finding fault with the *language* in which the New Testament was written, for being different from the genius of *modern* languages; and indeed, 'tis very easy to talk in general about *figures*, and *peculiar strange ways of speaking*, that render the design of these old books very *dark* and *uncertain*; but if it be found, that even *those passages*, which are urg'd as the strongest proofs of their *obscurity*, are almost *universally* understood in their just and proper sense, what will become of all this *shew* of reasoning? It will appear to be only starting *imaginary* difficulties, and amusing ourselves with *empty speculations* against *fact* and *experience*. For if particular texts are *very seldom mistaken* by the meanest of the people, this is the most convincing argument in the world, that they are, *in themselves*, *sufficiently clear and intelligible*.

Now thus the case stands most evidently, with respect to the greatest part of those texts, the meaning of which our author has laboured to prove to be *intricate* and *perplex'd* to the common people; the true state of the case, I say, is quite contrary to what he has represented it, *viz.* that they are *generally* and *thoroughly* understood. Where is the man who supposes, that when our Saviour says, *Think not I am come to send peace on earth; I came not to send peace but a sword* *, his

* Matt. x. 34.

words are to be interpreted *ſtrictly*; as if it was the *direct deſign* of his miſſion to put the world in a flame, and to promote and incourage contention and variance amongſt mankind, and the dreadful guilt and miſeries of war? Nay, who that knows any thing of the *mild*, *benevolent*, and *amiable* temper which the Chriſtian religion inſpires, can poſſibly entertain *ſuch a thought* as this? On the contrary, conſult the *loweſt* of the vulgar who think at all about it, and you will find that the ſenſe of this paſſage is *univerſally* agreed upon among them, and they will all *concur* in ſome ſuch paraphraſe of it as this: " Do not expect that I ſhall be *quietly* own'd " and ſubmitted to, or that my religion will " be *readily* and *peaceably* embrac'd, for if " you do, the event will *defeat* and *diſappoint* " your expectations; though I was ſent to " refine and *civilize* mankind, and root out " of their nature all *ſowre unſociable* and *miſ-* " *chievous* paſſions, and to make them *gentle* " *affable* and *condeſcending* in their behaviour, " yet, through the prevailing degeneracy and " corruption of the world, I ſhall prove the " *occaſion* of *ſtrife* and *diſcord*, of *unnatural* " *heats* and *animoſities*, of violent *hatreds* and " bloody *maſſacres*, and men will, upon the " account of *my religion*, break through the " bonds of *nature*, and the ſtrongeſt ties of " *humanity*; as if indeed the *very end* of my " coming was, not *to give peace*, *but rather* " *diviſion* * ; *to ſet a man at variance againſt*

* Luke xii. 51.

" *his*

" *his father, and the daughter againſt her mo-*
" *ther, and the daughter-in-law againſt her*
" *mother-in-law* †".

AGAIN, when it is ſaid, *if any man come to me, and hate not his father and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and ſiſters, yea, and his own life alſo, he cannot be my diſciple* *; the ſenſe of this text is never the leſs *obvious*, becauſe the expreſſions us'd in it are *figurative*. And accordingly, none of the moſt ignorant of the common people ever underſtand it *literally*, (their conſtant practice, even while they profeſs to have the hope of *good chriſtians*, is an evident demonſtration of the contrary) but only of a *comparative hatred*; i. e. in other words, that they are oblig'd to forſake their *deareſt friends* and *relatives*, and ſacrifice their *moſt valuable worldly intereſts*, nay *life itſelf*, rather than *renounce* Chriſtianity, or do any thing inconſiſtent with the obligations of their *religion* and *conſcience*; which is the very explication that Chriſt himſelf has given of it, in *other parallel* paſſages. *He that loveth father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me; and he that loveth ſon or daughter more than me, is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his croſs, and followeth after me*, i. e. who is not always prepar'd to ſuffer, whenever he is called to it, in defence of my religion, *is not worthy of me. He that findeth*

† Matt. x. 35. * Luke xiv. 26.

his life, ſhall loſe it; and he that loſeth his life for my ſake ſhall find it †. And *there is no man that hath left houſe, or brethren, or ſiſters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my ſake, and the goſpel's, but he ſhall receive an hundred fold now in this time, houſes, and brethren and ſiſters, and mother, and children, and lands, with perſecutions*; *i. e.* in a ſenſe of his *Integrity*, of the *greatneſs* of his mind and his *manly heroic* behaviour, he ſhall enjoy ſuch inward ſatisfaction, and ſuch pleaſing views of the approbation and favour of the ſupreme governour of the world, as muſt make even a *ſtate of perſecution* vaſtly preferable to the *beſt accommodations* and *pleaſures* of outward life, when ſecur'd by a *baſe* and *cowardly betraying* the intereſts of *truth and virtue*; *and in the world to come* ſhall receive *eternal life* *.

THE ſame is true as to the following texts, which are mentioned likewiſe as very *obſcurely* and *inaccurately* expreſs'd, *viz.* that the ſenſe of them is *eaſily*, and almoſt *univerſally*, underſtood. *Bleſſed be ye poor* ‡ is never taken *abſolutely*; but interpreted of *the poor in ſpirit*, or ſuch as have an humble mind, and moderate deſires ſuited to their circumſtances, and are contented with that condition in which providence has plac'd them. *Bleſſed are ye that hunger* ††, of them *that hunger after righteouſneſs*. *Woe unto you rich* ‖ of ſuch per-

† Matt. x. 37, 38, 39. * Mar. x. 29, 30.
‡ Luke vi. 20. †† *Ver.* 21. ‖ *Ver.* 24.

ſons

ſons only *who truſt*, or repoſe their ultimate happineſs, *in riches*, and do not lay out their wealth in acts of beneficence and liberality. *Bleſſed are they that mourn* ‡, *bleſſed are ye that weep* **, not of afflicted and diſconſolate *in general*; but of penitent mourners for ſin, and thoſe who have a tender and compaſſionate ſenſe of the ſorrows and miſeries of their fellow-creatures. And on the contrary, *Woe unto you that laugh now* †† is not interpreted as condemning a *chearful ſprightly* temper, or *innocent recreation*; but of the *vain*, the *impertinently gay*, the *voluptuous*, who make pleaſure their buſineſs; unmindful of the great concern of life, and utter ſtrangers to thoſe *grave* and *ſolid* reflections, which ſo well become rational beings.

So likewiſe, *Take no thought for the morrow* ‡‡ is never underſtood to exclude a *prudent care* to provide a comfortable ſubſiſtence; or ſuch a *wiſe* and *cautious* management of worldly affairs, as is moſt likely to enable men both to ſupport themſelves and their families decently and honourably at preſent, and to lay a foundation for *laſting* plenty and happineſs, and guard againſt *future* misfortunes; but only that *perplexing* and *anxious* concern about *futurity*, which makes them *ſuſpicious* and *deſponding*, deſtroys their reliſh of *preſent pleaſures*, and torments them with *imaginary evils*, and argues beſides *great diſ-*

‡ Matt. v. 4. ** Ib. *ver.* 25. †† Luke vi. 21.
‡‡ Matt. vi. 34.

truſt of the wiſdom and goodneſs of providence; which, as it has made proviſion for the conſtant ſupport of the *animal* and *vegetable* world, can't be ſuppoſed to have neglected furniſhing proper accommodations for the *rational*, vaſtly the moſt *noble* part of the creation, and to have left *them alone* expos'd to *neceſſary* want and miſery.

AND how *very few*, *comparatively*, are they, who underſtand theſe ſayings *literally*, *He that taketh away thy coat, let him have thy cloak alſo* *; and *reſiſt not evil, but whoſoever ſhall ſmite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other alſo* †; how *exceeding few*, I ſay, are they, *in compariſon*, who have interpreted theſe texts with ſo *rigorous* a *ſtrictneſs*, as to think all *ſelf-defence*, and *guarding their property*, *unlawful?* The expreſſions here us'd are *proverbial*, and in this view *the bulk of the people* have always conſider'd them, and put this *general* moſt *uſeful* ſenſe upon them, " that inſtead of indulging a *revengeful* hu-
" mour, and returning *evil for evil*, they
" ought rather to recede from their right in
" *little matters*, and put up *ſmall affronts*, as
" being the moſt likely way, upon the whole,
" to preſerve the *peace* of ſociety, and pre-
" vent the increaſe of *contention* and *diſorder*;
" whereas the inſiſting upon *full ſatisfaction*
" for every *trifling injury*, whether *real* or
" *imaginary*, and being intent upon a *ſtrict*

* Matt. v. 40. † *Ver.* 34.

" re-

" *retaliation*, has a natural tendency to *ir-*
" *ritate* and *inflame*, *more and more*, the
" passions of both the parties at variance,
" and make differences and animosities *per-*
" *petual*."

ONCE more, *Sell what you have, and give alms* *, is generally taken just as it was intended, not as a rule for *all ages*; but as *peculiar* to the *first times* of Christianity. And even then it was not properly a *precept*, as the author of *Christianity* &c. styles it, not a *law* of *universal* and *indispensable* obligation; but only an exhortation to a thing that was thought *expedient* in a *particular circumstance*. Nay, the custom itself was far from being *general:* for we find in the epistles to *Gentile* converts, and even to the *dispers'd* Jews, the usual distinctions of *rich* and *poor* mention'd, without the least mark of *dislike* or *censure*. It seems to me, that this use prevail'd *chiefly*, if not *only*, in the land of *Judea*; and very probably, for a reason *peculiar* to the state of that country and people. For as Christ and his Apostles knew, that the *Jews* would in a little time be *destroy'd*, and that then their *property* would be *ravish'd* from them, and their *possessions* become a *prey* to the injustice and violence of their victorious oppressors; they might, with reason, think it more *adviseable*, that they should be imploy'd for the *general good* of Christians, and the *relief* and *support*

* Luke xii. 33.

of their necessitous and suffering brethren, than fall into the hands of *common plunderers*, and minister to their *riot* and *luxury*. However this is certain, that, even in *Jerusalem*, a *community of goods* was not *absolutely* insisted on; for in the case of *Ananias* St. *Peter* expressly says, that *while* his land *remain'd* unsold *it was his own*; *and after it was sold, it was in his own power* (free from any obligation, *divine* or *human*, to make it a *common stock*) and he might have done with it whatever he thought fit. In all these passages 'tis plain that the sense of scripture is very *obvious*, and *generally understood* by common Christians. And indeed, I can't see how they should be led to understand any of them in their strictest meaning, not only if they make use of their *reason* to *direct* their inquiries; but if they interpret the New Testament *by itself*, and take the explications *there* given them; which it is so far from needing any great *pains* and *labour* to find out, that they will *almost necessarily* occur to every *ordinary* reader.

'TWOULD be endless to follow our author through all his *fancied difficulties* and *obscurities*; however, I shall add an instance or two farther. "Things commanded (he says) "are said positively not to be commanded; "as, *I spake not to your fathers, nor com-* "*manded them in that day I brought them out* "*of the land of* Egypt, *concerning burnt* "*offerings and sacrifices* *." But for the very

* *Christianity &c. p.* 335.

rea-

reason here given, *viz.* because "Things com-
" manded are said not to be commanded," 'tis scarce possible that any should *mistake* the sense of the place, and interpret it *literally*. Let us take the matter in this view. This very writer is suppos'd, by the author of *Christianity* &c. himself, to believe, *that burnt offerings and sacrifices were commanded by God*; 'tis therefore a *mere jest* to imagine, that he could be guilty of such a glaring *contradiction* and *inconsistency* as to *deny* this, and it will never enter into the imagination of *any reader*. So that there is not the *least difficulty* in this passage, but taking the whole of it in *connection*, its meaning is as *obvious* as any thing can be; *I spake not unto your fathers, nor commanded them*, &c. *concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices*; *but this thing commanded I them, saying, obey my voice* †; i. e. the *latter*, obedience to *moral* precepts, was what I *principally* requir'd, and the *former* I laid but *little stress* on in comparison of it; nay, in cases in which they may *interfere*, and come into *competition*, *I never commanded burnt offerings and sacrifices*. Such *clear obscurities*, and *easy difficulties* as these, we may allow ever so great a number of, without at all lessening the *usefulness* of the sacred writings; and I beg leave myself to add two or three of the same kind, which, I know not why they are omitted, but because 'tis undeniable they are *universally un-*

† Jer. vii. 22, 23.

derstood, and a *natural key* for the interpretation of this, and *all other* texts to the like purpose. *Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life* *; *set your affections on things above, not on things on the earth* †; and which is a very *exact parallel* for the *sentiment*, as well as the *manner of expression*, *I desired mercy and not sacrifice* ‡, *i. e.* rather than sacrifice; for to this sense we are naturally led by the latter part of the verse, *and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.*

I SHALL conclude this head with the words of a late most excellent and learned writer, who, in observing upon "the unbounded manner, in which the general duty of subjection to superiors, in every relative station of life, is express'd; *children and servants obey your parents and masters in all things* **; *let wives be subject to their own husbands in every thing*; says, †† Reason, and the nature of things, and the general usage of all language, sheweth, that in these and all other the like expressions, the phrase *in* every *thing* and *in* all *things*, must necessarily be understood to mean only, *in* all *things* just, in *all things* lawful, in *all things that are* honest *and* fit *to be done*. In *human* writings, these *general* manners of expression, arising from the

* Jo. vi. 27. † Col. iii. 2. ‡ Hos. vi. 6.
** Col. iii. 20, 22.——Tit. ii. 4. †† *Dr.* Clark's *Sermons*, Vol. III. *p.* 38——41.

known

" known and vulgar use of language, are " *never* misunderstood: and therefore to mis- " understand them in the *sacred* books *only*, " is mere perverseness. The gospel neither " *inlarges* nor *diminishes* any *superior's power*; " it neither *adds to*, nor *takes from*, any *in-* " *ferior's right*. In *these* cases it only con- " firms and explains the obligations of na- " ture; and inforces the *practice* of the re- " spective duties, with stronger and more " powerful motives. As therefore in all *other* " writings, so in *scripture* likewise; the true, " the natural, and evident meaning of such " phrases as these, *in* all *things*, *in* every " *thing*, and the like; is not what the word, " *all*, suggests in its *single* signification; but " what the *vulgar* sense of it is, in *such* ex- " pressions and sentences. When we are " taught that the commands of *God*, or the " laws of *truth and right*, are to be obey'd *in* " all *things*; the *nature* of the *thing*, not the " *force* of the *single words*, shews that the " obedience is to be *universal* and *without ex-* " *ception*. In *other* cases, where the very " *same words* are used (as, in the text, *Ser-* " *vants obey your masters in* all things;) the " nature of the thing *there likewise* no less " plainly shews, that this *obedience in all* " *things* is to be *limited*, by its *consistency* with " the commands of any *superior* master either " on earth or in heaven. In *all* language, the " signification of *every word* necessarily de- " pends upon the *other* words with which it " is connected: and where no *controversy* is

" con-

" concern'd, nor *prejudice* interpoſes, 'tis al-
" ways underſtood, and cannot but be un-
" derſtood to be ſo, by all underſtandings,
" and by all capacities equally, from the
" higheſt to the meaneſt. When the ſcrip-
" ture mentions *the* everlaſting *God*, 'tis not
" the force of the word *Everlaſting*, but the
" application of it to the *firſt cauſe and au-*
" *thor of all things*, that makes it denote a
" true and abſolute *eternity:* for when the
" ſame ſcripture mentions the *everlaſting*
" *mountains*, 'tis underſtood by all men both
" of the greateſt and of the ſmalleſt under-
" ſtandings, that it there ſignifies only *ſuch*
" a duration, as is proper to the ſubject of
" which it is ſpoken.—— In the queſtion a-
" bout *tranſubſtantiation*, the writers of the
" church of *Rome* allege with great confi-
" dence, that the *natural*, the *literal*, the *firſt*
" and *obvious* ſenſe of the words, *This is my*
" *body*, is plainly in favour of *their* ſide of
" the queſtion. And yet in reality the very
" contrary to this is evidently true. For
" the *natural*, the *literal*, the *firſt* and *ob-*
" *vious* ſenſe of the *phraſe*, is not that which
" ariſes from the ſignification of the word
" *body* ſingly, but that which ariſes from its
" natural ſignification in *ſuch* an expreſſion,
" wherein *commemorative bread* is affirm'd to
" be the *body of him who is commemorated*
" *thereby*. When a *picture* is ſpoken of, as
" being the *perſon* it repreſents; the *natural*,
" the *literal*, the *firſt* and *obvious* ſenſe of
" the expreſſion, is not that 'tis *really*, but
" that

" that 'tis *representatively*. When our Lord " says, *I am the true* vine; the question is " not what the word, *vine*, naturally signifies " in *other* cases; but what it *there* most *na-* " *turally and obviously* signifies, when a *teacher* " calls *himself a vine*, and his *followers* its " *branches*." In like manner, when a person sent from God to instruct mankind declares, that he that *eateth* his *flesh, and drinketh* his *blood, hath eternal life* *; 'tis the most *unnatural* thing in the world (and what, we may be sure, none would ever think of but in the *heat* of *dispute*, and under such *violent prejudices* as will pervert and darken even *self-evident truths*) to understand him *literally*; or to apprehend that he meant any thing more by it, than *entertaining* and *improving* his *doctrine*, which tended to promote *purity* and *virtue*, the *life* and *health* of the soul; and by that means to prepare men for a *happy immortality*. Our Saviour has indeed himself directly pointed out this sense to us, by saying, *The words which I speak unto you they are spirit, and life* †; and the *figure* here us'd is the *very same* which we find in the book of *Proverbs*, when *wisdom* is described as *killing her beasts, mingling her wine*, and *furnishing her table*, as *sending forth her maidens, and crying upon the highest places of the city,—come eat of my bread, and drink of the wine which I have mingled*; i. e. as it immediately follows, *forsake the*

* Jo. vi. 54. † *Ver.* 63.

foolish and live, and go in the way of understanding *.

HAVING proved thus largely, that the people do not *in fact misunderstand* a great number of the *figurative* and *proverbial* expressions us'd in scripture; and are not *at a loss* about the meaning of those precepts, which, according to the author of *Christianity* &c. " are deliver'd after a general, unde- " termin'd, nay, hyperbolical manner;" and consequently that *such a way of writing* does not, in the nature of the *thing itself*, hinder, but that the books of the Old and New Testament may, upon the whole, be a *plain* rule of conduct, fitted for *general* instruction, and use: I shall proceed one step farther, and endeavour to shew,

6. THAT the people might *as easily understand* those texts, the true meaning of which they *misapprehend* and *pervert*; or, in other words, that following the *same rules* would as certainly discover the sense of the *latter*, as it does that of the *former*; and that there is as *plain* and *full* a guard, in the books themselves, against the *errors* which they *fall into*, so far as they affect *important* principles of religion, or *moral* obligations, (and these are all the errors that it is of any *consequence* to prevent) as against those which they *escape*; so that the *rule itself* is equally *clear*

* Prov. ix. 2, 3, 5, 8.

and

and *intelligible* in both cases, and 'tis nothing but mens *indolence* and prejudice that make the *difference*, with respect to their understanding the *several* parts of it.

FOR instance, when *bodily parts*, and *human infirmities* and *passions*, are ascrib'd to God, I have shewn, that there are *very few* who take these passages *strictly*, and *literally*; not only because the literal sense contradicts those *natural* notions of the Deity which *reason* suggests, but is directly repugnant to *plain* and *express* declarations of scripture, that he is an *infinite invisible spirit* *. And may they not as *easily* see, that God could not in a *proper* sense, or by an *immediate operation* and *influence* on his mind, *harden* Pharaoh's *heart*; since this is as evidently contrary to *reason*, and to the most *clear* and *positive* testimony of revelation, that he *cannot be tempted with evil, nor tempteth any man* †; and especially when it is said to be done *only* in *such* a way, as is consistent with Pharaoh's *hardening his own heart* ‡? As our Saviour said of himself, that he *came not to send peace on earth, but a sword* **, purely, because his religion would prove the *occasion* of much confusion and violence in the world, quite contrary to its *design*, and *natural* and most *manifest* tendency; so God is said to have *hardened* Pharaoh's *heart*, be-

* Jo. iv. 24. 1 Tim. vi. 16. † Jam. i. 13. ‡ Ex. viii. 32.
** Matt. x. 34.

cause

cauſe his removing his judgments, and ſuffering the *Magicians* to perform, for a time, the ſame miracles that *Moſes* and *Aaron* did, was the *occaſion* of his *hardening his own heart*. This is the account given in the hiſtory itſelf*; and nothing can be more plain both from the relation we have of the fact, and the *general* doctrine of revelation, than that this dreadful effect was not, and could not be, owing to an *abſolute decree* of God that he ſhould not repent, or to any *poſitive* and *efficacious influence* upon his mind, but *ſolely* to his own obſtinacy and wickedneſs.

AGAIN, thoſe texts that ſpeak of God as *repenting* are ſcarce ever interpreted in the *common* and *uſual* ſenſe of the word, becauſe it is immediately perceiv'd to be *abſurd* and *irrational*; but *chiefly*, becauſe there are other paſſages which repreſent it as a thing *impoſſible*, that he ſhould *ſtrictly* and *properly* repent. Muſt we not wonder then, how any can poſſibly be induc'd to believe by the *mere ſound* of two or three texts, which, in their moſt *natural* and *obvious* conſtruction, have a quite *different* meaning, that the All-perfect governour of the world is an *arbitrary tyrannical* being, who, for the oſtentation of his *uncontroulable ſovereignty*, has abſolutely determin'd the final and eternal miſery of *great numbers* of his rational creatures? Muſt we not wonder, I ſay, how any can be prevail'd

* Ex. vii. 22.

upon

upon to believe this, in direct oppoſition to what the light of nature teaches concerning his *univerſal* and *unlimited* goodneſs; and to the *plaineſt* teſtimonies of ſcripture, that he *is good to all, and his tender mercies are over all his works**; that he *hath no pleaſure in the death of the wicked, but that he turn from his way and live*†; *is willing all men ſhould be ſaved*‡; and *ſo loved the world, that he gave his only begotten ſon, that whoſoever believeth in him ſhould not periſh, but have everlaſting life. For God ſent not his ſon into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be ſaved***?

AND to mention but one paſſage more: Is it not as *eaſy* and *natural* for the meaneſt of the people to underſtand theſe words, Jacob *have I lov'd, and* Eſau *have I hated*, †† only *comparatively*; or of God's giving the *preference* to the one above the other; as to take the *ſame* expreſſion thus (which they do *univerſally*) when our Saviour ſpeaks of *hating father and mother, wife and children* ‡‡, &c? And is it not moſt evident beſides from the book of *Malachi*, from whence the text is cited by St. *Paul*, that the effects of this love and hatred affected not directly the perſons of *Jacob* and *Eſau*; but their deſcendants the *Jews*, and *Edomites*; by the diſtinction made between theſe two nations, in the courſe of God's providence,

* Pſ. cxlv. 9. † Ezek. xxxiii. 11. ‡ 1 Tim. ii. 4.
** Jo. iii. 16. 17. †† Rom. ix. 13. ‡‡ Luke xiv. 10.

with

with reſpect to their *temporal* proſperity, and *outward* privileges? *I have loved you, ſaith the Lord; yet ye ſay, wherein haſt thou loved us? Was not* Eſau Jacob's *brother, ſaith the Lord? yet I loved* Jacob, and took his poſterity under my ſpecial protection and care; *and I hated* Eſau, *and laid his mountains and his heritage waſte* *.

I MIGHT add ſeveral other inſtances to prove the ſame point, *viz.* that the true doctrine of revelation is as *plain* in caſes where it is *miſtaken*, as in others, in which it is *generally underſtood*; but theſe may ſuffice as a ſpecimen. Some texts are *rightly interpreted*, others *groſly perverted*; but there are the very *ſame helps* and *advantages* for underſtanding the latter, as the former; and the *ſame guards* againſt *abſurd* and *erroneous* ſenſes; the natural conſequence of which is, that the *rule itſelf* is equally clear and intelligible with reſpect to both; and that the true reaſon why men think juſtly on the *one*, and not on the *other* is, becauſe in the one inquiry they proceed *impartially*, and, being under no *biaſs*, take the *firſt* and moſt *obvious* ſenſe of ſcripture; whereas in the other they are *negligent* and *careleſs*, or elſe their judgment is *already determin'd* in favour of ſome *party-ſcheme*.

'TIS a very *fallacious* way of reaſoning, to ſuppoſe thoſe texts *only* to be *clear*, which

* Mal. i. 2, 3.

are

are *univerſally* underſtood, and thoſe to be very *obſcure*, eſpecially if there be any thing *figurative* in the expreſſions, that are by *great numbers* miſinterpreted: for as the texts, which are generally underſtood, would have been never the *leſs plain in themſelves*, if they had been commonly miſtaken; ſo the other would not have been at all the *more plain*, if they had happen'd to be underſtood. The underſtanding any rule does not depend more on the *clearneſs* of the rule itſelf, than on the *diligence*, *honeſty*, and *unprejudic'd* temper of thoſe who are to be guided by it. So that 'tis of no moment in the preſent debate, that men, "by interpreting texts literally, have run "into monſtrous abſurdities *." For, under the influence of *enthuſiaſtic* deluſions and prejudices, they have abus'd *full as monſtrouſly* the religion of nature. *Reaſon itſelf* has made but a ſorry figure as a *guide*, when it has been overwhelm'd by *ignorance*, and *ſuperſtition*. In like manner, it muſt be own'd, that *revelation* has been very much darken'd by *myſterious comments*, and ſtraining ſingle texts to countenance *eſtabliſh'd* opinions, and ſupport the jargon of *ſchool-divinity*; and when the people take it for granted, that this is the religion of the *Bible*, all they have to do is, in the beſt manner they can, to *accommodate* ſcripture to it. But this is not at all the queſtion; the only point in controverſy is, whether the Chriſtian revelation,

* *Chriſtianity &c. p.* 339.

however it is in *fact* understood, be not in *itself*, in all matters of *real importance*, an *easy* and *intelligible* rule?

And what has been already said, I think, is sufficient to evince this. For those parts of the New Testament, which are express'd in the most *plain* and *simple* manner, give a *complete* and most *rational* account of the perfections and providence of God, and a *noble* scheme of morality; so that the meanest of the people, without concerning themselves at all with *figurative* and *proverbial* phrases, *allegories*, *parables*, &c. nay, if we suppose that they are not *capable* of understanding them, have an *excellent* system of natural religion, recommended upon more *certain* principles, and enforced by *stronger* motives, than mere reason ever *did*, or perhaps *can* suggest. And those *plain* accounts, the sense of which is *easy* and *obvious* to all, are a good general explication of all the *dark* passages. 'Tis evident farther, that the *literal* sense, in many cases, is not the most *plain* even to the vulgar; but on the contrary must appear *strain'd* and *unnatural*. And accordingly it has been shewn, that they, almost *universally*, agree in the *right* sense of a great number of passages, which are express'd after a *general*, *undetermin'd*, and *figurative* manner; and might as *easily* understand others which they misrepresent and pervert; and that there is *a sufficient guard*, *in the writings themselves*, against all errors

errors of conſequence, with reſpect to any grand points of religion and morality: ſo that if the people will but make a *common* uſe of their reaſon, and follow the *natural* and *eaſy* method of interpreting *dark* paſſages by ſuch as are *clear* and *determinate*; they are in no danger of being miſled, by the *peculiar ſtyle* and *phraſe* of ſcripture, into unworthy conceptions of God, or of miſtaking the general nature of true religion.

And allowing, what is a *neceſſary* conſequence from theſe premiſes, that Chriſtianity is plain in all its *practical* doctrines, and as a *moral rule*, which, without doubt, muſt be the *chief* deſign of any revelation, and not to amuſe the world with *abſtract* controverſies; other obſcurities about antient *cuſtoms*, *manners*, *ſects*, *philoſophy*, &c. nay, about any points merely *ſpeculative*, ſignify juſt nothing. For as God never would have given a revelation, if the errors of the world had not been of a *practical* nature, but conſiſted only in *abſurd theories*; ſo differences about ſuch things may *always* continue, and yet all the *ends* and *uſes* of the Chriſtian revelation, as a ſtanding rule, be *completely* anſwered. I might reſt the matter here, but can't forbear remarking once more,

7. That the author of *Chriſtianity* &c. repreſents ſome texts quite contrary to their *manifeſt* deſign; and others as *obſcurities* and *improprieties*, which, taken in their *ſtricteſt*

ſenſe, are moſt *plain* and *rational* accounts of things, nay, real *beauties*, and *excellencies*, in the moral ſcheme of revelation. For inſtance, he tells us, that " the Jewiſh rites " and ſacrifices are, in the Old Teſtament, " abſolutely condemn'd, as *an iniquity*, *and* " *an abomination to the Lord*, which *were* " only ſo conditionally *." And indeed, in the place which he refers to, theſe words are to be found; but any one that reads the whole paragraph muſt immediately ſee, that they are not deſcrib'd as *iniquity*, and *an abomination abſolutely*, and *in themſelves*; but the particular *reaſon* is expreſly aſſign'd, *viz.* the *wickedneſs* and *immorality* of the worſhippers, and their thinking to be acceptable to the Supreme Being for ſuch *external* ſervices, while they were guilty of the *worſt* of vices; *Your hands are full of blood* †. This method of picking *little ſcraps* out of a *connected* diſcourſe, by which means the moſt *moral* authors may be made to talk *impiouſly*, and the *graveſt*, and moſt *judicious*, *ludicrouſly* and *ridiculouſly*, is utterly inexcuſable in one that ſets up for a *critic*; and the more ſo, when criticiſms are deſign'd to point out the *defects* of writings, and leſſen their reputation; of writings which are of the greateſt *importance*, and *generally* in the higheſt eſteem. For, be it either a *careleſs* or *wilful* miſtake, 'tis not only an injury to the authors, but an affront and impoſition upon the world.

* Page 215. † Iſa. i. 15.

AGAIN:

AGAIN: our author mentions among his difficulties this text, *prove all things*; as if he was afraid that it would be taken, in its *literal* meaning, to be an exhortation to demonſtrate and judge of *mathematical* propoſitions, and abſtract *metaphyſical* truths, whereas 'tis only part of a ſentence, the whole of which, in the judgment of all that read it, muſt neceſſarily be confin'd to *religion* and *morality*. And the *natural* ſenſe of it is, that Chriſtians ſhould believe nothing *implicitly*, but uſe their underſtandings to judge of the *nature* and *conſequences* of *all things* that are recommended to them as *divine* truths, and of their *evidence*; and when they have form'd their judgment upon *mature* reflection and examination, *hold faſt that which is good*, i. e. adhere inflexibly to what they apprehend to be right and fit; *and abſtain from all appearance of evil**. And certainly in this view, which is the view in which it is always conſider'd, 'tis a moſt *excellent* piece of advice, uſeful for *all* mankind, and in *all* ages; and I am ſurpriz'd to find it objected againſt by one, who is ſo great a friend to *free* inquiry, and would be as likely as any man to quote, and uſe it *himſelf*, upon other occaſions, as an expreſs declaration againſt *bigotry*, and *implicit* faith.

AND muſt it not be very ſtrange to find it urg'd as an *impropiety*, and great *difficulty*,

* 1 Theſ. 5. 21, 22.

that, " persuasion is call'd compulsion, as, " *compel them to come in* *," by one, who writes in a language in which no expressions are more common, than " the force of elo- " quence, the force of persuasion, the force " of example, the force of importunity," and the like? The best way of answering such objections would be to pass them over in *silence*, were it not to shew the world what *little* things are rak'd together in order to render Christianity useless; things, which, in any other argument, I am perswaded, would be thought *below censure*.

But let us consider what he says upon other passages. Why God's *permitting evil* is called *doing it: Shall there be evil in a city, and the Lord hath not done it* †? Nay, the Lord is said to have *created evil* ‡. And here I suppose likewise he takes the phrase *creating evil* to signify no more than the *permission* of it. If so, he has not, in my opinion, a just notion of the *sense* of the texts, nor of the *concern* of providence in this affair. For the evil spoken of, in both these passages, is evidently what we call *natural* evil *only*. Now a great deal of this may *properly* and strictly be said to be of God's *appointing*, or *creating*, because it *necessarily* results from the *original* frame and constitution of things. And even when beings who act *freely* are the *voluntary* instruments of pain and misery to

* P. 335. Luke 14. 23. † Amos 3. 6. ‡ Is. 45. 7.

each

each other, it must be consider'd, that this is *one law* by which God governs the world, that free agents shall, at least in all common cases, be left to the *full* exercise of their natural liberty; and besides, the permission of these evils is not the *indolence* and *carelessness* of one, who is *unconcern'd* about the state of the universe, and the course of human affairs; but must be look'd on in this view, *viz.* as his suffering things to go on in such or such a particular channel, because it is upon the whole *wise* and *fit*, and agrees with the *general scheme* of his providence.

AGAIN: when St. *Peter* says, that, by the gospel, *are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises, that by them we might be partakers of the divine nature* *; does our author imagine, that any will think we are capable of being partakers of the *necessary eternity*, and *immensity* of God? Is not the most *obvious*, and only *intelligible*, sense of the phrase, that we may resemble him in his *moral* attributes; or, which is the frequent acceptation of the *Greek* word, and a very common use of the word *nature* in our own language, be of a *God-like temper* and *disposition?* And is not this the *noblest* end that rational beings can propose, and consequently the *highest* that any revelation can pursue? And the same may be said of our Saviour's exhortation to *be perfect, as our heavenly Father is perfect* †:

* 2 Pet. 1. 4. † Mat. 5. 48.

when taken *generally*, it can signify no more in its *first*, and most *natural* meaning, than "imitate the moral perfections of God;" and is never understood otherwise. But indeed the *strict* sense of it, as it is the conclusion of a discourse upon that particular subject, is, that we should practise the most *generous*, *disinterested*, and *perfect* degree of charity and mercy, even *good-will* and *beneficence* to our enemies, after the example of our *heavenly Father*, and that we may be his *children*, *who maketh his sun to rise on the evil, and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just, and on the unjust* †. And therefore 'tis express'd by St. *Luke* thus, *Be ye merciful, as your Father also is merciful* ‡.

But this leads me to consider what our author has said with relation to the precepts of *forgiving injuries*, and *loving enemies*, which have always been thought very great *excellencies* in the Christian scheme; and will still appear to be so, notwithstanding the objections he has made to them, which are, in reality, very *slight* and *inconsiderable*. He expresses his opinion about this matter in *general*, in the words of *Celsus*, that "the doctrine of *forgiving injuries* was not peculiar "to the Christians, though they taught it "after a grosser manner *." And why? Because the command is given in a *general*

† Mat. v. 45. ‡ Luke vi. 36.

* *Christianity* &c. *p.* 341. *Origen. contra Celsum*, lib. 7. pag. 373.

indefi-

indefinite way; whereas there are certain neceſſary *reſtrictions* and *limitations*, without which it would be attended with fatal conſequences. It muſt be "interpreted conſiſtently with what the light of nature dictates "to be our duty, in preſerving our reputation, liberty, and property; and in doing "all we can in our ſeveral ſtations, to hinder "all injury and injuſtice from others, as well "as ourſelves †." Undoubtedly it muſt: but thoſe exceptions are ſo *plain*, that they will always be *ſuppos'd*, and conſequently there was no need of their being *diſtinctly ſpecified*.

THE Chriſtian religion makes no *alteration* in the natural rights of mankind; it no where forbids neceſſary *ſelf-defence*; or ſeeking a *legal* redreſs of injuries in caſes, wherein it may be *expedient* to reſtrain *violence* and *outrage*, to maintain private *right* and *property*, and ſecure to the honeſt and peaceable the advantages of *civil life*; but all the explications it gives of the duty of *forgiving injuries* are perfectly conſiſtent with this. For the ſubſtance of what it recommends and inculcates upon this head relates *chiefly* to the *temper* of the mind; that we be ready to *paſs by* ſmall affronts, and not forward to execute *private revenge*; that we be diſpos'd to put the moſt *candid* interpretation upon the deſigns and actions of thoſe who have

† *Chriſtianity &c. p.* 340.

in-

injur'd us, and make all the *favourable* allowances that the nature of the case will admit; and that while we suffer the greatest wrongs, we maintain a *general benevolence* and *good-will* to our enemies, a sincere *desire* of their happiness, and a *constant disposition*, upon all proper occasions, to promote it, and return *good for evil*. This, I say, is the true notion of *forgiving injuries*, as it is stated and explain'd in the New Testament. The gospel therefore proposes the example of God, in his conduct toward sinful men, as the general *rule* and *measure* of that *lenity* and *forbearance*, which we ought to exercise toward each other. Now the utmost that can be inferr'd from hence is, that if our offending brother is so *ingenuous* as to acknowledge his offence, and, by making all the *reparation* that is in his power, gives us sufficient reason to think his repentance *sincere*, we are bound to receive him again into our *friendship*, and ought never to *upbraid* him with former faults, but to be as *heartily* and *entirely* reconcil'd to him, as if he had never given us any just ground of *complaint*; as we expect, that God, upon our unfeign'd repentance and reforming the errors of our past conduct, will receive us into *full* favour, and *remember our iniquities no more*; and that in other cases, after the example of the same most *merciful* and *compassionate* Being, we incline rather to *gentle* methods, than to demand a *hasty*, *strict*, and *rigorous* satisfaction for every affront that is offer'd us; nay, that we *still* preserve

ſerve *benevolent* affections towards an enemy, though he is *unrelenting*, and *inflexible*. There is nothing at all in this, which, every one who has examin'd particular paſſages, muſt ſee to be the doctrine of the Chriſtian revelation, that in the leaſt diſallows of that *ſelf-defence*, which reaſon and the laws of our country direct to.

NAY, 'tis far from being a *paradox*, that a man may *forgive an injury*, at the ſame that he ſeeks a *legal redreſs* of it. For he is to be conſider'd, both as a perſon who has receiv'd a *private* injury, and as a *member* of ſociety, which ſuſtains likewiſe ſome *damage* by the injuſtice and violence that every one of its members ſuffers. Now 'tis moſt evident, that he has no *right* to *forgive* the wrong, ſo far as the general intereſts of *ſociety* are concern'd; and therefore muſt be oblig'd, when 'tis neceſſary to do juſtice to the *community*, and for the *public good*, to *proſecute* the offender. But then he may be ſaid to *forgive* the injury, ſo far as 'tis *perſonal*, and relates to himſelf as the *immediate* ſufferer, if, according to what the goſpel teaches, inſtead of indulging *rancour* and *malice*, and forming *miſchievous* deſigns againſt his enemy; he heartily wiſhes his *welfare*, and is ready *generouſly* to *aſſiſt* him, and do him any *private ſervices*, that are not inconſiſtent with *neceſſary ſelf-defence*, and the *general happineſs*.

LET me add, that the precept of *forgiving injuries*, if it had ſtood in the Chriſtian ſcheme ſingly, and without any *farther* explication, would have been altogether as *plain* as *Confucius*'s rule, " never to revenge in-" juries ;" the latter being full as *general* and *undetermin'd* as the former, and requiring the very ſame *limitations*, and *exceptions*. For it will be aſk'd, what is *revenge ?* And if it be anſwer'd, that it is not " legally proſe-" cuting a man who has injur'd me ;" it will be ſaid likewiſe, that this is not forbidden by the precept of *forgiving injuries* ; and the reaſon of the thing muſt as *ſoon*, and as *eaſily*, be apprehended in the *one* caſe, as in the *other*. So that the author of *Chriſtianity* &c. has ſhewn only his great *partiality*, in preferring *Confucius*'s maxim to that of our Saviour ; and might as well, and, 'tis not unlikely, would have done the very ſame thing, if the *Chriſtian precept* had been found in *Confucius*, and *his* in the goſpel.

HE goes on to find fault with the phraſe of *loving our enemies :* and the ſum of his argument is, that " the paſſions of love and " hatred given us by God, are to be exercis'd " on proper objects. Actions, abſtractedly " conſider'd, are not the objects of love and " hate, but perſons for the ſake of their " actions ; and the actions of ſome men are " too deteſtable to create in us any ſenti-" ments, but of averſion ; ſo as to oblige us " to

" to bring them to a condign punishment.—
" If love carries with it complaisance, estee m
" and friendship, and these are due to all
" men; what distinction can we then make
" between the best and worst of men *?"
Mere *cavilling* this about the *use* of a word; and, I may add, *idle useless* cavilling, since 'tis *universally* known what was intended by it.

OUR author himself can't imagine surely, nor can it ever enter into any reader's thoughts, that when our Saviour exhorted to *love our enemies*, he design'd to recommend an inward *esteem* of the malicious slanderer, the oppressor, and cruel persecutor, who have discarded all sentiments of *honour*, *justice*, and *humanity*; or a *complacency* in persons of such vile characters; but only the having *kind* and *benevolent* dispositions towards them, and a sincere desire of their *happiness*. And since 'tis obvious to all, that he could mean no more than this, what if it does not come up to the *full* sense of the word, as 'tis generally us'd *at present?* This will not so much as prove an *impropriety of speech*. For might it not be a very *common* acceptation of it, at the time when our Saviour deliver'd this precept? And have not all people a right to put what senses upon words they please? Or is it reasonable for us to find fault with any language, merely because the *same ideas*

* *Christianity* &c. *p.* 342.

are

are not fix'd to particular words, as in *our own?*

But it happens in fact, (which ſhews that the objection is entirely groundleſs) that in all *moral* writings, whether *antient*, or *modern*, *love* moſt *generally* ſignifies, what it does in this precept of the Chriſtian religion, *benevolence* or *good-will*; and may be exercis'd towards particular objects, not only where there can be no *eſteem*, and *complacency*; but even while we are oblig'd to *puniſh* them. Thus it is always allow'd, that a parent may love a wicked and diſobedient child, though he has the greateſt *abhorrence* and *deteſtation* of his crimes; and to this it is imputed, that he has ſuch an *affectionate concern* for his welfare, and *earneſt* deſire of his *reformation*. Nay, even *rigor and ſeverity*, and a *proper puniſhment* of his faults, are ſuppos'd to be not only *conſiſtent* with *love*, but to ſpring directly from it. I can't help obſerving upon the whole, that it does not appear, that the author of *Chriſtianity* &c. means any thing more by *not revenging injuries*, than that I am not "to puniſh for puniſhment-ſake;" and that "common prudence will oblige me, "ſometimes, to overlook ſlight injuries *;" it does not appear, I ſay, that he thinks himſelf bound, over and above this, to cultivate a *benevolent* temper, and a *diſpoſition* to do *kind offices* for an enemy. And if this be

* *Chriſtianity* &c. *p.* 341.

really

really the caſe, both his *own* morals, and thoſe of his oracle *Confucius*, are vaſtly inferior to the *Chriſtian* morality, which inculcates much more *noble* and *generous* virtue.

FINALLY, we are aſk'd, *Whether* "rules "concerning morality ſhould not be ſuited "to mens particular circumſtances, plainly "deſcribing the conduct which they require? "*Whether* this is not the deſign of the muni- "cipal laws in every country? *And* what "benefit ſubjects could have, from laws writ- "ten in ſuch a looſe, general and unde- "termin'd manner; as *lend, hoping for no- "thing again*, &c.?——'Tis *ſaid, We are to "render to* Cæſar *the things that are* Cæſar's; "but muſt we not learn from the laws in "every nation, who is *Cæſar?* And what is "his due?——We are *to render all men their "dues*; but what thoſe dues are, we are to "learn from the reaſon of things, and the "laws of the country *."

THE drift of all this *ſtrange* reaſoning muſt be to prove, if any thing, that *general rules* of conduct are of no ſervice to mankind; whereas, in truth, the *whole* of natural religion and morality itſelf conſiſts in *general* principles, that are of *univerſal* and *immutable* obligation and uſe, and *eaſily* accommodated to particular circumſtances. A writer of *morals*, according to this way of thinking, muſt

* *P.* 344.

be

be reckon'd to talk *loosely*, who advises in *general* " to be charitable to the poor; to give to " those who are in want; and be ready to " assist, and support others in their necessities, " without any prospect of a recompense;" which is the *plain* and *obvious* sense of *Lend, hoping for nothing again*; or if he exhorts " to yield due obedience and submission to " magistrates; or to do justice to all men;" and 'tis absolutely necessary for him to specify, for every man, the particular *kind*, the proper *objects*, nay, I can't see how we can help going so far as the very *proportion* of his charity; to understand the *laws* and *constitutions* of every country; and the *particular demands* which each man has upon another. Whereas on the contrary, *rules suited to mens particular circumstances* can't possibly be given in a discourse of this kind; or, if they could, as circumstances perpetually *alter*, they would not be parts of that *eternal* and *immutable* law of nature, which it must be the great design of a revelation to recommend, and inforce. There is not one *natural* obligation this author can name, incumbent upon *all* mankind, but must be express'd in a *general undetermin'd manner*; for if it be *particular* and *circumstantial*, it can only be a rule for *individuals*, and not for the *whole* rational species. And 'tis altogether as absurd to expect in a revelation design'd for the use of *all nations*, and to last to the *end* of the world, none but *rules suited to particular circumstances*, as to talk of an *eternal temporary* law, or an *universal* parti-

particular. The rule of *rendering to all men their dues*, if interpreted in *general* of the payment of *just* debts, is altogether as plain, as if the *particular dues* were specified; that of *rendering to* Cæsar *the things that are* Cæsar's, as if we were expressly told who was meant by *Cæsar*; as king *George* for *England*; *Lewis* the fifteenth for *France*, and the like: and the same may be said of the duty of relieving the necessitous in *general*, fixing on the most *proper* objects, and in *proportion* to our circumstances; that it is an *easy* and *intelligible* rule, in applying which to particular cases, men of the least reflection can *hardly ever* mistake. Indeed, as I have already observ'd, 'tis a most *wild* and *extravagant* attempt for a *moralist* to endeavour to fix these things *precisely*, and therefore he must content himself with giving *general* directions.

I SHOULD have proceeded farther in the vindication of particular passages of scripture, but that I have reason to hope this part will be undertaken by a very *able* hand, who, I make no doubt, will do *justice* to the argument, and give *entire* satisfaction to the world. Those which I have consider'd have fallen in *incidentally*, in pursuance of my design to shew, that the Christian revelation, notwithstanding the *peculiarity* of its style and manner of expression, and all the *difficulties* and *obscurities* that are charg'd on it, is, upon the whole, very *plain*, and *useful*, as a standing rule of religion and morals;

and that all its *essential* doctrines, containing *helps*, *encouragements*, and *motives* to virtue, are very *obvious* and *easy* to be understood by the bulk of mankind. And after this, all other *obscurities*, about ancient *customs* and the like *extraneous* circumstances, and points merely *speculative*, will be look'd upon as *trifles* by the judicious and impartial; and be thought not at all to interfere with the design and use of the Scriptures, as a *divine revelation*. However, every reader will see, that what I have said upon some of the texts cited by the author of *Christianity* &c. will serve to explain and defend many others, which, to avoid being tedious, I have not mention'd. But because he has endeavour'd particularly to expose several passages in the *historical* books of the Old Testament, I would, before I conclude this chapter, add one remark more, namely, that though these passages may be vindicated, as far as 'tis reasonable to expect we should be able to account for all the things contain'd in books written at so great a *distance*, when the *customs* and ways of *writing* were so different from what they are at present; yet before we allow ourselves to be *oblig'd* to undertake the defence of them, there is a *previous* question proper to be consider'd, *viz.* how far we are bound, by the *quotations* and *references* in the New Testament, to acknowledge the divine authority of the Old, and especially of every *historical account* that is given in it. And I mention this the rather, be-

cause

cause 'tis most certain, that, in the nature of the *thing itself*, there is no *connection* between the two ideas, for instance, of *Moses* being assisted by God, in an *extraordinary* manner, in bringing the *Israelites* out of *Egypt*, and forming their *religion* and *polity*; and his *infallibility* as an *historian*. Nay, he may be a *credible* and *unexceptionable* witness to all the facts which he relates upon his own *knowledge*, or of whose truth and certainty he had himself *opportunities* of being *fully* inform'd; even though he should not be exactly right in *every* circumstance of his history of the world, and the state of religion, before his own times; in compiling which, if he had no other helps than from the best *records* and *traditions* he could meet with, there may be some *defects*, and yet the account upon the whole be *authentic*, and highly *valuable*. And if upon stating and examining this question fairly it appears, that we are not oblig'd, in order to support the Christian revelation, to defend *all the historical passages* of the Old Testament, we are eased of an *unnecessary* trouble; if the contrary, we shall, at least, have the satisfaction to know that we proceed in a *just* and *regular method*, and do not reason in the dark.

CHAP. IV.

A GENERAL *defence of* positive *commands.*

I Come now to consider the case of *positive* duties. Our author supposes, that if Christianity be a *divine revelation*, it can be nothing else but a *revival* of the universal and immutable law of nature; that it enjoins no *duties* but what are *as old as the creation*, and *as extensive as human nature*; nothing which, *as to the manner* of it only, *is indifferent* *; and consequently, that there cannot be the *least* difference between *natural* and *reveal'd* religion, but in the *method* of their *discovery*; and "if instituted religion varies "from the religion of nature and reason in "any one particular, nay, in the minutest "circumstance, that alone is an argument, "which makes all things else that can be said "for its support totally ineffectal †." This is the point to be determined; and it must be own'd, that it is a point of very great *importance*; because, as it is undeniable, that the gospel institution does command several things that are *merely positive*, we must be able to shew that such injunctions are not repugnant to *reason*, nor subversive of *moral obligations*, nor inconsistent with the *wisdom*, *justice*, and

* *Christianity* &c. *p.* 122. † P. 60.

goodness

goodneſs of God, in order to make a *rational* defence of it. And that we may argue diſtinctly and without confuſion upon this ſubject, and ſhorten the controverſy as much as poſſible, let us ſee what *conceſſions* are proper to be made, and lay down ſome *common principles* in which both parties may agree.

1. THEN, it muſt be allow'd, that the *ſubſtance* of true religion always *has been*, and ever *will be*, *the ſame* in all ages, and nations; conſiſting in the belief of *ſuch principles*, and the practice of *ſuch duties only*, as are founded on the nature and *reaſon* of things; and that this univerſal eternal and immutable religion cannot be *ſuperſeded*, *alter'd*, or *contradicted* by an external revelation.

2. THAT the *religion of nature* is the whole of religion that is *valuable for itſelf*, as having an *intrinſic* and *neceſſary* goodneſs; and conſequently *poſitive inſtitutions* muſt be entirely *ſubſervient* to it. They are not deſign'd, as this author very frequently, but looſely, inſinuates, to *mend* the religion of nature, but *excite* to the *practice* of it; and are only ſo far valuable, as they ſtrengthen moral obligations; either by cultivating and improving in our minds *ſuch ſentiments*, as have a tendency to promote *true* and *ſubſtantial virtue*; or by guarding againſt *particular errors*, and *ſuperſtitious* cuſtoms, to which mankind had been *long addicted*, and which

were found by experience to have *obscur'd*, *perverted*, and almost intirely *destroyed* that *true* religion of rational beings, which results from the *immutable relations* of things. So that they are *insignificant* and *trifling* observances, if they are not *helps* and *motives* to the practice of morality, and if they are *substituted in the place of it*, or *undermine* it in any instance, *hurtful* and *impious*.

'TIS indeed very strange, that any who consider the *necessary differences* of things, should confound the *subordination* of *positive* to *moral* duties, which is as plain, as that *ends* are more excellent than *means*; and that they should think there is any comparison, in point of *real value* and *excellency*, between that, which consider'd *in itself* has *nothing at all* to recommend it, and would be absolutely *indifferent* and *useless*, were it not for *the end* which it is design'd to promote, and the *end itself*, the eternal unchangeable religion of nature, which is *essentially* and *intrinsically* good. 'Tis the consideration of the *end alone* that *consecrates*, and gives a *value* to the *means*, and consequently *that* must be of infinitely superior efficacy; and we can have no rule of judging, if what is in itself *good for nothing* deserves an *equal* regard with the most *excellent* and *useful* thing in the world.

AND agreeably to these most plain dictates of *reason*, we find that the scriptures both of the *Old* and *New Testament* constantly

assert, that *instituted* religion is for the sake of *natural*; and declare in the strongest terms, that positive duties, without moral righteousness, are not only *mean* and *despicable*, but highly *offensive* to God; that he lays *no stress at all* upon them in comparison with the rational duties of *piety* to himself, and *justice* and *mercy* to our fellow creatures; and that we cannot entertain more *unworthy* and *dishonourable* thoughts of him than by imagining, that he is as much pleas'd with *external Services*, that are, in themselves, of no *worth* or *importance*, as with an imitation of his *perfections*, and obedience to *moral* laws, which is the highest *improvement* and *rectitude* of human nature, and the source both of *private* and *social* happiness. This, I say, is the constant strain of *revelation*, as well as the voice of *reason*. And tho the observation of *positive institutions* may, with reason, be *strictly* insisted upon, for the tendency it has to promote *true goodness*; nay, tho God may immediately interpose, and punish the wilful contempt of a *positive* law more *severely*, in this world, than the violation of a *moral* precept; as what may be necessary, upon its first appointment, to give the former a *sanction*, and maintain its *sacredness*, and *authority*, since it wants that *intrinsic goodness*, which recommends and supports the latter; this is far from proving, that the duties of instituted and natural religion are upon a *level*, and much farther from giving *the preference* to *positive* duties above *moral*. The only way

to come to a rational determination in this point is, to consider, when things are circumstanc'd that one or other of these duties must necessarily be omitted, *which of the two* must give way; and if it be an *everlasting* rule, that, in every supposeable instance of *competition*, positive duties must *yield* to moral, this is a demonstration that moral duties are *superior*, and claim our *ultimate* regard.

3. FROM these principles it necessarily follows, that as nothing which contradicts *natural religion*, or weakens *any* of its obligations, can be part of a *revelation* which hath God for its author; and no man who is *wilfully deficient* in any branch of *moral* duty can rationally expect to obtain the favour of God, be he ever so scrupulous and exact with respect to *ritual* and *instrumental* observances; and consequently that it is the height of folly and presumption, by the utmost care and zeal about *instituted* religion, to hope to compound for *irregularities* and *excesses* of the *sensual* passions, or for *pride*, *uncharitableness*, *cruelty* and *revenge*, or any other notorious and hurtful *immoralities*: so, on the contrary, those who sincerely practise the *great duties* of natural religion, comprehended under the two heads of *the love of God*, and *our neighbour*, will not be condemned for their ignorance of the *peculiar* doctrines of revelation, or for not understanding, or not seeing the reason and obligation of *positive* precepts; because they have attain'd the *great end* of religion, which

which all the *subordinate* duties of it must be design'd to promote, *viz.* rational piety and likeness to God, the right government of their passions, and fixing in their minds habits of justice, and universal benevolence.

HOWEVER, this does not hinder, but that if men *wilfully* neglect any part of *instituted* religion, they may be *justly* punish'd; since such a wilful contempt even of *positive* duties, apprehended to be *commanded by God*, is as truly an affront to his *wisdom* and *authority*, as a contempt of *moral laws*: 'Tis a violation of an *eternal rule of righteousness*, viz. that God is to be reverenc'd and obey'd in ALL the known significations and discoveries of his will; and consequently an *immorality*. So that even in this case they forfeit the divine favour, not merely for a failure in matters of *external ceremony* (by which *alone*, the state of mankind with respect to God's most wise and impartial judgment, and their final happiness or misery, will never be determin'd) but for transgressing the *fundamental law* of natural religion itself.

BY allowing these things, *viz.* the *superior excellency* of natural religion; the *moral tendency* of instituted means; and the *necessary subordination* of positive to immutable moral duties; it will appear, that a great part of the reasonings of the author of *Christianity* &c. is fully answer'd; who has *inaccurately*, as I would hope only, and not *designedly*, in order

der to miſlead the *ſuperficial* and *incautious* reader, confounded, throughout his whole book, *the falſe ſentiments* of the weak and ſuperſtitious with the *nature of the thing itſelf.* Let us now proceed to conſider what he has advanc'd upon this head; and whether it is of any weight againſt *poſitive duties*, as the *deſign*, *importance*, and *uſe* of them has been ſtated and explain'd.

THE argument which the ingenious author ſeems to lay moſt ſtreſs on, and to think it never could be urg'd too often, is this; "that the religion, which God gave men from "the beginning, was, without doubt, moſt "perfect; ſince no religion can come from "a Being of infinite wiſdom and perfection, "but what is abſolutely perfect. Can there-"fore a religion abſolutely perfect, admit of "any alteration; or be capable of addition, "or diminution; and not be as immutable "as the author of it? Can revelation add "any thing to a religion thus abſolutely per-"fect, univerſal, and immutable *?"

NOW in order to ſee clearly, whether there be any thing in this *boaſted* demonſtration, that holds againſt poſitive duties *rightly underſtood*, 'tis neceſſary for us to conſider, what we muſt mean when we ſpeak of natural religion as *perfect*. And in general, there muſt be ſome *rule* or *meaſure* of

* *Chriſtianity* &c. *p.* 3, 4.

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perfection, by which it is to be *tried*. A thing may be said to be *perfect*, when, all present circumstances consider'd, it is *sufficient* to answer its end. A *law* or *rule* of conduct therefore, the *perfection* of which must be judg'd by its *suitableness* to the condition of those to whom it is given, and its *sufficiency* to direct to every thing that is *fit*, and *becoming* persons *so constituted*, and *circumstanc'd*, may be *perfect* in that view, or *completely adapted* to answer its design, and yet *comparatively* imperfect: it may be *perfect* in present circumstances, and very *defective* in others.

To apply this to natural religion. The original religion or law of nature, which consider'd men only *as men*, in the *integrity* and *rectitude* of their faculties, and not as *ignorant*, *superstitious*, and *degenerate*, was undoubtedly *perfect*; *i. e.* it was *suited* to their circumstances, and *sufficient* to teach them their duty, merely as reasonable creatures, and furnish them with all *necessary motives* to excite to the practice of it; and if they had observ'd it, a revelation would perhaps have been *needless*. But when they had *corrupted*, and in a great measure *lost* the knowledge of the law of their creation, and God, having compassion upon their *ignorance* and *depravity*, thought fit to afford a *revelation*; though the ultimate design of that revelation be, to recover them from their errors and vices to the knowledge and practice of the true religion

gion of nature, all muſt allow, that their circumſtances are *vaſtly different* from what they were *originally*; and from thoſe *different* circumſtances *different* duties neceſſarily reſult. Thus it becomes their duty to acknowledge *the divine authority of the meſſenger*, that is ſent for their recovery; not only as 'tis in itſelf fit, that in every inſtance, they ſhould act agreeably to the *truth* of things, and characters; but becauſe without this, they cannot receive the *revelation itſelf*, nor conſequently the *advantage* that God intended them by it *. And it may be *proper* for them moreover frequently to conſider, and impreſs ſome principles upon their minds, as *motives* and *helps* to the practice of true religion, and

* THOUGH "faith conſider'd in itſelf" [*i. e.* barely as the act of the mind in *aſſenting* to the *truth* of propoſitions] "can neither be a virtue, or a vice; becauſe men can no "otherwiſe believe than as things ap- "pear to them †:" yet that they appear *in ſuch a particular manner* to the underſtanding, may be owing entirely to themſelves. *Faith* therefore may be fitly *rewarded* as the reſult of *ſerious conſideration*, and *impartial enquiry*; and *unbelief* juſtly *puniſh'd* as proceeding from *wilful negligence*, and *vicious prejudices*. And whenever there is *ſufficient evidence* of the truth of a propoſition, and it may reaſonably be expected, taking in all circumſtances, that men ſhould *conſider* and *examine* this evidence, which, if *fairly conſider'd* and *examin'd*, will not fail of convincing the judgment; *to believe*, muſt be a *duty*, and *not to believe* a *vice*. This is the ſenſe (as will be evident to every one who reads the New Teſtament with attention) in which theſe words are always to be underſtood, when *faith* is requir'd as neceſſary to obtain acceptance with God, and *unbelief* condemn'd. The one is conſider'd as a *virtue*, and the other as a *crime*, only as they ſpring from *good*, or *bad* principles; from *moral rectitude*, or *depravity* of mind.

† *Chriſtianity* &c. *pag.* 51.

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to prevent relapſing into their former *ſuperſtition*, and *wickedneſs*, which the reaſon of mankind could not diſcover from *the beginning*; becauſe they neceſſarily ſuppoſe certain things which did not *then exiſt*, viz. that they have departed from the *primitive law* of their creation, and that a *revelation* has been given to ſet them right again. So that mens particular religious obligations may, and muſt, in ſome things, be *different* by *revelation*, from what they would have been, had they been left to the *mere unaſſiſted* light and dictates of *reaſon*; and yet it may be allow'd, that the law of *reaſon*, the *original* law of human nature, was perfect; *i. e. ſufficient*, if rightly *attended to*, and *obſerv'd*, to anſwer *its end*.

IF the ingenious author ſhall aſſert, that thoſe duties, which are only fit, upon ſuppoſing a *revelation given*, are, however, parts of the *law of nature*, which "takes in every "thing that is founded on the reaſon and na"ture of things*;" that "like the law of na"tions, or the laws of particular countries," they "are only the law of nature adjuſted, "and accommodated to circumſtances †;" and that "if our natural notions of the di"vine perfections demonſtrate, that God will "require nothing of his creatures but what "tends to their good; whatſoever is of this "kind, is a ſuperſtructure that belongs to the

* *Chriſtianity* &c. *p.* 13. † P. 63.

"law

" law of nature; or, in other words, what " the reason or nature of the things themselves " plainly point out to us." Let it be so; the religion of nature then may be not only the *original religion* of *mere reason*, but *duties* that could not be *known* without a revelation, and which are *only proper* upon *supposing* a revelation. And though this way of speaking may seem to many *new*, and *inaccurate*, and is, by no means, to be reconcil'd to the *general strain* of this author's reasoning; we may be very well contented if he will allow, that *faith in Christ*, for instance, the *belief* of a *revelation* which is not *universal* (for such, I have already shewn, it is consistent with the *perfections* of God for him to give) and impressing frequently and strongly upon the mind *such principles*, and keeping up the remembrance of such *important facts*, which, though grounded intirely upon the *acknowledgment* of a revelation, have, a *moral* tendency; that these things, I say, are parts of that religion which is *as old as the creation, and as extensive as human nature.*

After what has been said concerning the *fitness* and *advantage* of the *thing itself*, and such *concessions*, all that remains to be settled is, whether God may not appoint *the manner*, in which a thing, that is useful in itself, shall be done; or whether it must be left to every man to do it *when*, and in *what way* he thinks fit? In the *positive institutions* we are speaking of, which tend to fix princi-

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ples and disposítions in our minds, that are the *strongest motives* and *encouragements* to the practice of natural religion; and by perpetuating the *design* of the revelation, to make us careful how we *abuse* and *pervert* it; 'tis plain there is nothing which even the adversaries of revelation can pretend is *absolutely indifferent*, but the *manner* in which we are to inculcate and keep alive such sentiments as are *in themselves proper*, *suited* to our circumstances, and of *moral* use. And therefore if it can be shewn, that there are no objections of any consequence against God's *interposing*, and *fixing* this; nay, if upon some accounts it is *expedient* that he should do it; this will amount to an *entire vindication* of *positive duties.*

THE appointing *particular rites* is not for the sake of the *rites themselves*, but to engage men in *proper* and *useful* reflections, and give them a strong sense of their *obligations*; which is a *rational* means of religion. These *reflections* therefore, and this *sense* of their *obligations*, as *a means* of religion in their circumstances, *reason* might direct to; and if they were frequently inculcated, and had their due influence upon the mind, the design of *instituted rites* would, in a great measure, be answer'd. But if this be *sufficient*, why is any *particular method* fix'd? Because men are apt to be negligent of what is left in a *general*, undetermin'd way; whereas by their being *oblig'd* to *certain observances*, the design of which, they know, is, to engage them

them in such *meditations*, and fix in them such principles of *moral* conduct, and which they perform *directly* with this view, the end is more *effectually ascertain'd* and *secur'd*. I might rest the matter entirely upon this foot. For if in particular circumstances such meditations are *proper*; if the firm belief and lively influence of such principles is fit to be *cultivated*, and *improv'd*; if these things are of great importance to strengthen *moral* dispositions, and support the *universal* and *constant* practice of the duties of *natural religion*; the most *probable* way of producing this good effect is certainly a consideration worthy the infinite *wisdom* of God. And if, considering the indolence, carelessness, innumerable avocations, distracting cares, sensual pursuits, and the general conduct of mankind, it appears that things of consequence are likely to be *omitted*, or very much *neglected*, if they are not fix'd and determin'd by a *particular rule*; the appointing such a rule clearly demonstrates to us not only the *wisdom*, but the *goodness* of the supreme Being; since it is the most *effectual* means to secure the *virtue* and *happiness* of his creatures.

But to this we may add farther, that the doing a thing in a way which God has *prescrib'd*, and in obedience to his *command*, has a natural tendency, with all who have a becoming *reverence* of his infinite perfections, and consider him as the *inspector* and *judge* of their

their conduct, to beget greater *seriousness* and attention of mind, and consequently to make a *deeper* impression, than *transient cursory* thoughts, enter'd on at *pleasure*, and not under the *awe* of such an *express obligation*. So that there is very *good reason* why God should interpose his *authority*, and order that to be done in a *particular manner*, which, in the *general* consideration of it, is *useful*; be it either to keep up the *memory* of *certain facts*; or to *impress* upon the minds of men such principles as are evidently of *moral* use, to beget and confirm *good dispositions*, or guard against *corruptions* of the true religion; and if there be a good reason for *a particular method*, it must hold equally strong for *any* particular method which is *significant*, and *natural*, and appears *wisely adapted* to answer the *general end*.

SHOULD it be said, if this be wise and rational, *reason* will direct to it; why then is it not left to every man's *discretion* to fix upon those rites which he likes best; which are most suitable to his *temper* and *genius*; and which, he knows by experience, are most likely to *affect* him? Why must the *same rules* be prescribed to ALL, when their capacities, humours, and passions are so *various*? And why are they not at liberty to *alter* them, as *circumstances* alter, for others which they think will be more *effectual*? I answer, that this is liable to the *same inconveniences* as the not having these things *fix'd* at all, because it being still left *at large*, the general design of

ſuch inſtitutions cannot be ſo *effectually* ſecur'd, as if it was determin'd by the *ſupreme lawgiver*;—— that if there be any reaſon for appointments of this nature, a being of *perfect wiſdom* is more *proper* to take the care of them, than *ignorant*, *miſtaken*, and *fanciful* men;—— that the conſideration of his *immediate command* muſt give a greater *ſolemnity* and *weight* to them, than they can have, if they are conſider'd as the reſult of *mere human prudence*;—— and above all, that if this matter be not *determin'd* by ſome *ſupreme authority*, to which all will think themſelves oblig'd to *ſubmit*, endleſs differences and confuſions muſt, not *accidentally*, but in the *natural conſequence* of things, enſue; and every man's private opinion, prejudice, and humour, being his *only rule*, rites will be multiply'd *infinitely*, and a *boundleſs ſuperſtition* introduc'd.

I READILY grant the author of *Chriſtianity* &c. that the *inſtituted means* preſcrib'd by revelation are not of ſuch *fix'd* and *immutable* obligation, " but that, agreeably to the " law of nature," they are to be *practis'd*, or *omitted*, " as beſt ſuits that end for which " they were ordain'd. To imagine the con- " trary (as he judiciouſly obſerves) is to make " things, dependent on circumſtances, inde- " pendent; things that are proper only un- " der ſome circumſtances, neceſſary under all " circumſtances; nay, to make ends muta- " ble, and means immutable; and that theſe " are

" are to continue in force, though by change
" of circumstances they become prejudicial;
" nay, destructive to the end for which alone
" they were ordain'd *."

WHEN *external rites* can't be observ'd without great *inconvenience* in particular countries, they may undoubtedly be dropt; in like manner, when the observation of a positive precept would be injurious to *health*, inconsistent with our doing necessary acts of *beneficence*, which are of prior obligation, and the like. But how does this affect the present argument, which does not suppose that instituted means are fix'd, but with such necessary *exceptions*? Does it prove in general, that God cannot appoint the *manner* in which things that are useful shall be done? Or that such institutions may not be of *standing*, and *perpetual* authority in all cases wherein they do not *destroy*, or *interfere* with, their end? May they not be of that nature, as, taking the *general* state of the world, may be proper (so far as obedience to positive laws, which are subservient to *morality*, and the *good* of mankind, can ever be requir'd) in *all* ages, and nations? And may not the observation of them, even with these *limitations*, be of great advantage, and consequently *wisely* enjoin'd by the supreme Law-giver? May not things be requir'd, that are (I mean in the nature of the *things themselves*, for that is the

* *Christianity &c. p.* 104, 105.

only queſtion at preſent) of *undoubted uſe* upon the whole; though they may not always ſuit the circumſtances of each *individual*, or the ſtate of *all* countries *equally*, in *every* age of the world?

THERE is nothing that can with any ſhew of reaſon be objected againſt the fixing poſitive laws, in the manner in which their obligation has been explain'd, even " in a re-" ligion deſign'd to extend over the whole " world, and laſt to the end of it †," but their being *impracticable*, or not to be obſerv'd without great inconvenience *in general*; and not at *certain* ſeaſons, and in *particular* conjunctures only, which can't poſſibly be avoided. And I ſhall ſhew, when I come to treat particularly of theſe, from what was moſt probably the true intention of the *legiſlator*, that this is not the caſe with reſpect to *any* of the *poſitive inſtitutions* of Chriſtianity; and that the obſervation of them, by perpetuating the memory of certain facts, guarding againſt the worſt corruptions of true religion, and begetting ſuch ſentiments and diſpoſitions, as are of evident *moral* tendency, muſt be very uſeful *every where*, and in *all times*. 'Tis ſufficient at preſent to obſerve, that there *may be* inſtituted means, which, with reſpect to the nature of the *actions themſelves*, may *generally* be practis'd without inconvenience; and if practis'd only in *ſubordination* to moral

† *Chriſtianity* &c. *p.* 107.

duties,

duties, the end they are deſign'd to promote, be *always* of uſe: otherwiſe, all actions muſt, in themſelves, be attended with more *evil* than *good* upon the whole; and it muſt be denied, either that the *ſame* ſentiments can be always proper to ſtrengthen *moral* diſpoſitions; or, that advancing the great ends even of *natural religion* will be of advantage in *all* ages, and countries.

BUT does not what has been ſaid deſtroy "the uſe of *all* occaſional commands, ſince "it ſuppoſes *they* can't oblige people longer "than they judge it fit to obſerve them *?" Not at all, if they never judge it *unfit* to obſerve them, but when it is *really* unfit; which, I have ſhewn, may not be the caſe upon the *whole*, but only in ſome *particular* circumſtances that *ſeldom* happen, and muſt be *excepted* by the *wiſeſt* and moſt *uſeful* conſtitutions of civil government. Let this author prove, that poſitive commands are *neceſſarily*, and in the *nature* of the things themſelves, *unfit* to be obſerved in general, and he does ſomething; or let him prove, that becauſe they may happen to be *abuſed* through "the "ignorant prejudices of the *weak*, and *ſu*-"*perſtitious*, and the deſigns of *ambitious* "men †," they ought to be entirely *laid aſide*; and not practis'd by thoſe who underſtand them *rightly*, and to whom they are an *uſeful means* of religion, in a proper *ſub*-

* *Chriſtianity* &c. *p.* 113. † Ibid. *p.* 109.

ſerviency to their end. But let him take this thought along with him, that if things which are calculated to be *always uſeful* are to be eſteem'd *hurtful*, and *diſcarded*, *merely* becauſe they are *perverted*, the *beſt* and moſt *excellent* will be condemn'd with the *worſt*; and we ſhall not be able to ſtop at giving up *inſtituted religion*, but muſt renounce the *uſe* of *reaſon itſelf*.

THUS have I largely vindicated *poſitive* precepts againſt the *main* argument which our author hath urg'd againſt them, that argument in which he ſeems moſt to *triumph*, *viz.* the *abſolute perfection* of natural religion, and have endeavoured to explain the *general* nature and deſign of them; and ſhewn, that when he argues againſt their being of ſuch *ſtrict indiſpenſable* obligation, as to bind at all *times*, and in all *circumſtances*, he argues not againſt the *things themſelves*, but only againſt the *miſtakes* of enthuſiaſts, or the *corruptions* of deſigning men. It will be very eaſy, upon this ſtate of the caſe, to anſwer all his other objections, which I ſhall therefore more briefly conſider.

THUS, for inſtance, it appears that all his reaſonings againſt *mere arbitrary* commands are nothing at all to the purpoſe, becauſe 'tis evident from what has been ſaid, that theſe are not *unneceſſary* and arbitrary inſtitutions. The *ultimate deſign* of them is to inculcate ſentiments, or to be a memorial

of

of facts (as I shall prove hereafter, with respect to the positive injunctions of Christianity) which, though they suppose a revelation given, are, in such a circumstance, very *proper* to beget *moral* habits, to excite to a more *diligent practice* of the duties of natural religion, and prevent mens *relapsing* into their former gross corruptions of it; and consequently is *wise* and *rational*, and *conducive* to the perfection and happiness of mankind. There appears *in general* to be very good reason, why God may appoint a *particular manner* of doing things, that are *in themselves* useful; both as it is the most *probable* method to *secure* the good effect of them, and that they may be more *regarded*, and make the *stronger* impression; and if so, there must be a foundation in *reason* for ordaining any particular manner which is proper to answer the end. So that there is nothing in all this that is, *strictly* speaking, *arbitrary*, or unworthy the care of a *wise* governour. The general design *good*, and *serviceable* to virtue; the fixing a particular method *best suited* to promote this design; and ALL to be consider'd in entire *subordination* and *subserviency* to the eternal and unchangeable laws of morality. Neither the *substance* of such instituted duties, nor the appointing a certain manner in which they are to be perform'd, are absolutely *indifferent*, but there is a *reason* and *use* in both.

IF any shall be so trifling as to object, that if *two rites* are *equally* adapted to serve the

same design, the choice of *either* of them must be *arbitrary*. I answer, that the general reason for appointing *some particular* rite is a sufficient reason for taking *either* of them; but as there is no *real difference* between the two, one is not, and cannot be, *prefer'd* before the other as *fitter in itself*, which would indeed be acting *without a reason*.

THIS I take to be a full answer to all our author's long and frequent declamations against *arbitrary*, and *tyrannical* precepts, which, though they may deserve to be consider'd by the *rigid* imposers of *human ceremonies*, that only *incumber* religion, instead of having any *useful influence* towards advancing true and substantial goodness; do not at all affect positive duties of *divine* appointment, for enjoining which there is always *a reason* to be assign'd, besides the *mere will* of the law-giver. And he himself has allow'd, that if there be "any reason to deprive men of their liberty "in indifferent things" [and the case is exactly the same, if there be *any reason* for making actions, that are in themselves indifferent, sacred rites of religion] "they then cease "to be indifferent *."

I SHALL add however under this head (though it is not necessary to vindicate positive precepts as above explain'd, in which there is not the least mark of *arbitrariness*, and *tyranny*) that let a thing appear to be, in *itself*,

* *Christianity* &c. *p.* 135.

of

of no *particular* moral use; let it be allow'd, that we can assign no *special* reason for its being enjoin'd; but that, *abstracted* from the consideration of a *divine* command, it seems altogether *indifferent*, and to have nothing, either in its *nature*, or *peculiar* tendency, to recommend it above *other* things, in which men are left at their *full liberty*; I think it will be very hard, if not impossible, even upon this state of the case, to prove, that there cannot be *any general reason* for appointing the observation of it, and that one such *minute variation* " in instituted religion from the " religion of nature, and reason, makes all " things else that can be said for its support " totally ineffectual *."

FOR let us suppose a *pretended revelation*, the design of which, upon being carefully examin'd, is approv'd of as most *wise*, *rational*, and *useful*, and which is, in *all other* respects, as *perfect* as we can conceive any thing of that kind to be. Let this most *excellent* scheme of doctrine be not only adapted, in *general*, to promote the highest moral perfection, and happiness of human nature; but suited exactly to the *circumstances* and *necessities* of a corrupt and degenerate world; to enlighten their reason in *those points*, about which it was most perverted and darkned, and reform their most *flagrant* and *hurtful* errors. If, together with these *internal* characters, it has the attestation of *numerous* and *undeniable* miracles; shall *one* or *two* positive

* *Christianity* &c. Page 60.

 institu-

inſtitutions (I appeal to the *cool*, and *impartial reaſon* of mankind) ſhall, I ſay, *one* or *two* poſitive inſtitutions, for which we cannot diſcern that there is any *particular* reaſon, ſet aſide *all this evidence*, which otherwiſe would be admitted as moſt *clear* and *unexceptionable?*

No miracles indeed will prove *irrational* and *immoral* doctrines to be from God, becauſe we are *infallibly certain*, from our knowledge of his *moral* perfections, that he *cannot* reveal any ſuch doctrines; but we are far from being *ſure*, that he can *in no caſe whatever* enjoin the practice of *indifferent* things, for which there does not appear, from the *peculiar nature* or *tendency* of the things themſelves, to be any *ſpecial* reaſon; all therefore that we can have to conſider is, on which ſide the greateſt *probability* lies. And this may ſoon be determin'd; becauſe we can give *no account*, how the *pretenſions* of a doctrine claiming to be a divine revelation ſhould be *thus* ſupported, by having ſuch *internal* marks, as plainly demonſtrate it could not proceed from *evil* ſpirits, and by the teſtimony of *miracles*, which prove beyond doubt the *interpoſition* of ſome *ſuperior inviſible agent*, if it be not *really divine*; whereas on the other hand, there may be *general reaſons* for enjoining certain things, which appear to have no *particular* reaſon founded on the *things themſelves*, or *uſe* at all. Whoever denies this muſt deny likewiſe that God

God can have a *wiſe* deſign in any of the methods of his providence towards mankind, which they do not *perceive*; and upon ſuch a *groundleſs* preſumption, which is contradicted by *univerſal* experience, refuſe to be determin'd by what, himſelf would otherwiſe allow, to be the *cleareſt*, and *fulleſt* proof poſſible of a *divine interpoſition.*

But beſides, the uſing ourſelves to *reflections* of this kind, which ſuch a command will *naturally* excite in us, *viz.* " that God " is to be obey'd in *all* the ſignifications of " his will, becauſe as he is abſolutely *wiſe*, " and *good*, he can enjoin nothing without a " *reaſon*," will perhaps *ſuggeſt in part* what the *reaſon* of ſuch inſtitutions *may be*, *viz.* to *cultivate* this principle, and keep up a *conſtant ſenſe* of it in the mind. And for the great *importance* and *uſefulneſs* of this I ſhall only ſay, that as it tends to *habituate* to us the higheſt *reverence* of God, and moſt entire *ſubmiſſion* to his authority; ſo the *want* of it has been the true cauſe, that ſo many *little pretenders* to reaſon and philoſophy have, in all ages, taken upon them to *cenſure* ſeveral things, both in the conſtitution of *nature*, and courſe of *providence*, *merely* becauſe they have *not underſtood* them; and urg'd their own *ignorance* ariſing from the narrowneſs of their faculties, or perhaps from a ſuperficial knowledge, and confus'd way of thinking, their own *miſtakes*, and *inadequate* conceptions, as *real faults* in the frame of the univerſe;

univerſe; and conſequently as objections againſt the abſolute *wiſdom* and *goodneſs* of the creator, and governour of all things.

And conſider'd in this view, why may not ſuch commands be given to creatures in a ſtate of *trial*, agreeably to the *general end* of their being plac'd in ſuch a ſtate, which is not for the *information* of the Divine mind, but to *exerciſe*, in a *proper* manner, their *moral* diſpoſitions and habits, and by that means *ſtrengthen* and *improve* their virtue? Let it be granted, that "moral and immoral things "*are* the moſt proper ſubjects for *this* *;" 'tis enough that *theſe other* may not be *improper*. And whereas the author of *Chriſtianity* &c. aſks farther, "if earthly kings, who may "be deceiv'd, and for the moſt part are ſo, "would be juſtly eſteem'd tyrants, if they "require things of their ſubjects merely to "try their obedience; how can we think "this of the *omniſcient*, infinitely glorious "king of kings†?" 'Tis ſufficient to anſwer, that there is no arguing from *earthly* governments to *God's* government of the world; and what would be *tyrannical* in the one, may be very *wiſe* and *fit* in the other; becauſe the *power* of earthly kings is to be exercis'd *no farther*, than the *end* of their *civil* authority requires, which *end*, the *order*, *peace*, and *happineſs* of ſociety, cannot be any way advanc'd by ſuch *arbitrary* injunctions; whereas the

* *Chriſtianity* &c. *p.* 176. † Ibid.

chief

chief deſign of God's government being to promote *inward* rectitude, and eſtabliſh right principles and diſpoſitions in the *mind*, whatever has a tendency to beget or confirm *ſuch diſpoſitions* may be appointed by him, without incurring the imputation of *arbitrarineſs* and *tyranny*.

THE ingenious author tells us farther that "there is no way to avoid this objection, of "*God's willing contrarieties*; but by ſuppoſing he requires nothing of men, but what "is founded on the nature of things, and "the immutable relations they bear to one "another; and what, conſequently, they are, "as far as concerns them, capable of knowing. But this objection is unanſwerable by "thoſe, who believe the will of God is not "always thus founded; but may contain "many merely poſitive things; ſince men "may, after having taken all poſſible care "to be in the right, have very oppoſite ſentiments; and be oblig'd, by the will of "God, to hold, and act contrarieties *."

IF he means by *things merely poſitive* ſuch as are *abſolutely uſeleſs*, or which *are commanded only for commanding-ſake*; theſe are not the things I am bound to defend, becauſe it will hereafter be ſhewn that Chriſtianity enjoins *nothing of this kind*. And I would fain know, what *contrariety* there is between duties, that

* *Chriſtianity* &c. *p.* 6.

differ

differ no otherwise than as *means* and *end*? Is there any *inconsistency* between *positive* duties and *moral*, when the *positive* are enjoin'd in perfect *subordination* to, and have a tendency to support the *practice* of *moral* duties. Do they *destroy*, or in the least *clash* with each other? The case is only this, that *some duties* are *requir'd* of such as enjoy a revelation, which are *not requir'd* of those who want it; *i. e.* in other words, their *duties* differ, according as their *circumstances* differ; and this is as true upon the foot of *natural religion only*, as upon the supposition of a *revelation*; and that, not only with respect to the *means* of religion, but the *substance* of it. What, for instance, can be more different, than the duties of *prosperity*, and *adversity*; the duties which spring from the mutual relations of *parents* and *children*, *masters* and *servants*, and the like? If it be said, that these are *universal* duties, because they oblige *all* mankind in *such circumstances*; this may likewise be affirm'd of *positive* duties, that they would oblige *all*, if all were in the *same circumstances*, and had the *same knowledge* of the revelation. And any farther than they have the *means* of knowing them, they are not *concern'd* to know them; their *ignorance* will not in the least hinder their *acceptance* with their maker. The sum of the whole is, that upon supposing a *revelation communicated to some parts of the world, and not to the rest*, (which has been already vindicated) mens *particular* religious obligations

must of necessity be *different*, tho not *inconsistent*; and the one have *certain duties*, which the other *cannot discover:* In this case indeed, men may, " after having taken all possible " care to be in the right, have very opposite " sentiments, and be oblig'd, by the will of " God, to hold, and act contrarieties," or rather, the one to *do some things* which the other *is not bound* to do; and yet neither be *wrong*, because they may both do *all*, that can *justly* be expected from them.

I HAVE consider'd the matter in this view, that I might not drop *any part* of our author's sense. But, I own, I am not certain whether he means, that positive and moral duties are *contrarieties*; or that " men are " oblig'd, by the will of God, to hold, and " act contrarieties," because some are *bound* to certain duties by *revelation*, which others, with all their care and diligence, *can't discover*, nor consequently be under an *obligation* to practise; or else, that those who have equally the *use* of the revelation may, after an impartial search, *differ* about the nature of positive institutions, and being *oblig'd* each, *by the will of God*, to follow the direction of his own judgment and conscience, which, in this case, prescribe *contrary* rules, must be bound by the same " will, to hold and act " contrarieties." The two former senses have been sufficiently consider'd, and to the latter 'tis easy to reply, that if there be any thing in it, it must prove, that God can give *no laws*

laws to mankind of *any sort*, but what all, who are *honest* and *impartial*, must necessarily understand in the *same precise* sense; but this is not, and 'tis great folly to expect it ever will be the case, with respect to *particular* branches even of *moral* duty. *Honest* men have always *differ'd* (and there is no ground to imagine, that *such differences* will cease in any age hereafter) in explaining both the laws of *revelation*, and *reason*. And it will be an *excellent* consequence indeed of our author's reasoning, if, upon this account, we must throw up both *positive* and *moral* duties, *i. e.* in short, *all religion*, reveal'd and natural, at once.

And whereas it is asked, "how it can "be conceived, that God's laws, whether "internally, or externally reveal'd, are not "at all times the same, when the author of "them is, and has been immutably the same "for ever*?" I answer, that this, if *rightly* understood, infers the *direct contrary* to what it was intended to prove. For the *unchangeableness* of God only supposes in *general*, that he will always *necessarily* do what is *wisest* and *best*. If therefore some things are *proper* upon supposing a *revelation*, for which there could be *no foundation* at all, if men were left to the mere light of *reason*; and if it be upon several accounts *expedient*, that the *manner* of doing such things should be expressly

* *Christianity* &c. *p.* 103.

fix'd,

fix'd and *determin'd*, which, I apprehend, has been fully prov'd; even the *immutable wisdom* and *goodness* of God must *oblige* him, in these *different circumstances*, to make mens particular duties and religious obligations *different*; and command *certain things* by revelation, which can't be *universal* laws because not *discoverable by all*, nor consequently belong to the *original* religion of nature.

THE only charge, which remains against positive duties, is the charge of *superstition*. Now in order to set this matter in a clear light, and shew that there is no *just* foundation for such a charge, I would observe the following things.

1. THAT there is a sense, in which what the ingenious author seems to think a great absurdity may be true, *viz.* that "what is "superstition by the light of nature, *may be* "a part of religion by revelation *." I don't mean, that what the reason of mankind must *necessarily*, at *all times*, and in *all circumstances*, condemn as *superstitious*, can ever *cease* to be so; for this would be to assert, that the natures of things *are not* what they *are*, and consequently to maintain *contradictions*; but that what might *justly* be esteem'd *superstition*, if men were left to the direction of the *light of nature* only, will lose that character if God

* *Christianity* &c. *p.* 136.

interpoſes, and by an *expreſs revelation* enjoins the practice of it.

For inſtance, our author, I make no doubt, will readily allow, that if a thing may " as well be done this as that way *," the fixing and eſtabliſhing, by human authority, certain particular rites as *neceſſary*, and of *univerſal* obligation, and ſuppoſing that men are not at *liberty* to make uſe of *any other*, or of *none at all*, is rank *ſuperſtition* and *enthuſiaſm*. But this I ſhall endeavour to ſhew *is not*, and *cannot* be, the caſe upon the ſuppoſition of a revelation given, and that the matter is determin'd by a *divine law*.

It has been already largely prov'd, that the *deſign* of poſitive inſtitutions is to improve *moral* diſpoſitions, and conſequently *rational* and *good*; that there may be a *wiſe reaſon* for appointing a *particular method*, in which things, that are *uſeful in themſelves*, ſhall be done; and conſequently, for appointing *any* particular method that is calculated to anſwer the *general end*; and that if there are *two* methods *equally* proper, the general reaſon for fixing *any* method at all is a ſufficient reaſon for taking *either* of them. So that the manner of doing a thing, tho in itſelf *abſolutely indifferent*, may be made a part of mens *religious obligations* by the great governour of the world, conſiſtently with his moſt

* Ibid.

perfect

perfect *wiſdom* and *goodneſs*; which, if they themſelves took upon them to fix it as a law *binding conſcience*, would be *weak* and *ſuperſtitious*. If therefore we are convinc'd, that a command of this ſort, which has been ſhewn to be *worthy* of God, is *actually* given by him; the yielding obedience to it is ſo far from being *ſuperſtition*, that it is a branch even of our *moral* duty. Our obligation to ſubmit to it reſults from one of the *firſt principles of natural religion*, viz. that God can command nothing but what is *juſt* and *rational*, and conſequently has a right to be *univerſally* obey'd; and to ſay that we are not bound to practiſe *every* thing, which we have clear evidence *he* requires of us by *revelation*, as well as by the law of *reaſon*, is indeed to make *all religion* ſuperſtition.

For why is it, that we conſider *moral* duties themſelves as parts of *natural religion*? Is it merely becauſe they are in themſelves fit, and have their foundation in the *immutable* nature and relations of things, without having any regard to the *authority* of that Supreme being, who has plainly declar'd it to be his *will* that we ſhould obſerve them, by *framing* that conſtitution, and *appointing* thoſe relations, from which they neceſſarily ariſe? Undoubtedly, 'tis not. For however *amiable*, upon this ſuppoſition, the practice of thoſe duties might be, however *becoming* rational beings, and *neceſſary* to promote the happineſs of mankind; it could not with any propriety

be call'd *religion*, if we *excluded* the conſideration of God as our *governour* and *judge*; and did not regard them as *laws* which *he* hath given us. And, on the contrary, if we do conſider him as our *wiſe* and *righteous* governour, this will neceſſarily lead us to practiſe *every thing* that we are perſuaded is *his will*, whether *moral*, or *poſitive*; otherwiſe, we renounce the *dependence* of creatures on their creator; or ſuppoſe, that he is an *unjuſt tyrannical* governour who is not fit to be obey'd; and conſequently overturn not only all *external revelation*, but *the religion of nature and reaſon itſelf*.

I HAVE all along ſuppos'd, that God may be the author of *poſitive inſtitutions*, which, I think, has been fully prov'd, and that men are convinc'd, that *particular inſtitutions* of this kind are *divine*; and allowing this, if the obſervation of them be *ſuperſtition*, the conſequence will neceſſarily be the *ſubverſion* of all religion. But if, on the contrary, this principle be *true*, without which even *natural religion* cannot ſubſiſt, *viz.* that the *authority of God*, *plainly perceiv'd*, ought, *in all caſes*, to determine our behaviour; wilful diſobedience to a *poſitive* precept, though in itſelf *mutable*, muſt be an *immorality*, and conſequently a violation of the law of reaſon, which is *eternal* and *immutable*. Though the command itſelf be *poſitive*, the *argument* for obedience is *moral*.

INDEED if men rest in *outward rites* even of *God's appointment*, and are only concern'd about performing the *ceremonial* part, but are not led by them, according to the *design* of their institution, to cultivate and impress upon their minds those *useful sentiments*, which have a tendency to beget and improve *moral* dispositions, and are *alone* the means of religion, the *particular manner* being only appointed as the most *likely* way to *ascertain* their good effect; if they think, that God is pleas'd with *mere external* forms, which, in themselves, are but *trifles*, and imagine, that they shall " propitiate an all-wise and gracious " being by such things as have no worth or " excellency in them *," nay, if they fancy that there is an *efficacy*, to procure the divine favour, in the *best part* of instituted means, inculcating proper reflections, and a becoming sense of their obligations, whether the *great end of all*, producing and strengthning *moral* dispositions, be promoted, or not; their religion is *as truly* superstition, as if it was entirely the offspring of their *own will and fancy*. But if there be a reason, why things, which are *in themselves useful*, should be appointed to be done in a *particular manner*; if *this manner* be thought of importance above *others* that, in the nature of things, might be *equally proper*, only because God, for *wise ends*, has directed to it; if the *whole of insti-*

* *Christianity* &c. *p.* 136.

tuted means be consider'd as in a necessary *subserviency* to the eternal laws of morality, and look'd upon as *insignificant* and *trifling*, if they do not excite to the practice of that religion, which is *substantially* and *unchangeably* good; if it be thought *impious* to *separate* the means from the end, and much more to make them *destructive* of it, or hope to compound, by the most scrupulous exactness about *external* and *instrumental* observances, for the neglect of *indispensable moral* duties; here is not the least appearance of *superstition:* No "unworthy notions entertain'd of God; no conceiving of him as an arbitrary, light, or passionate *" being, pleas'd, and offended with trifles; but as a *wise* and *gracious* governour, who takes the most *effectual* methods to make the means of religion *useful*, and consequently to advance the *virtue* and *happiness* of his subjects; and has establish'd the due subordination of *means* to *ends*, and requires and accepts instituted religion only in its *proper place*, *i. e.* so far as it promotes a more *strict* regard to *natural*, and the practice of *rational* and *real* goodness. But,

2. As the observation of positive duties, in the manner in which they have been describ'd, and the *design* and *reason* of them argued, is not, and cannot, *in itself*, be *superstition*; I shall endeavour to shew farther, that it has no *tendency* to *superstition*. That positive in-

* *Christianity* &c. *p.* 135, 136.

stitutions

ſtitutions have been uſed *ſuperſtitiouſly*, and men have laid an *equal* ſtreſs upon them as upon *morality* itſelf, can't be denied; nay, that they have reſolv'd the *whole* of religion into *external* obſervances, and inſtead of making it conſiſt in the neceſſary duties of *piety*, *juſtice*, and *charity*, placed it not only in *the means inſtituted by God*, but in *trifling* ceremonies, *uſeleſs* ſpeculations, and *incomprehenſible* myſteries of man's *inventing*, and *impoſing*; and that their *zeal* for theſe things, animated by *blind* ſuperſtition and prejudice, and under the influence of *intereſted* and *deſigning* men, has tranſported them beyond *all bounds*, even to deſpiſe and trample upon the *ſacred* and *eternal rules* of natural religion, we have many *ſad examples* to prove. And let this wild enthuſiaſm be *expos'd* to the utmoſt; let the craft and knavery of *politicians*, or *prieſts*, who have debauch'd the conſciences of men, and their natural ſenſe of good and evil, be repreſented in the moſt *odious colours*. But though wiſe and honeſt men of *all parties*, who are concern'd for the purity of religion, heartily wiſh all *poſſible ſucceſs* to ſuch a deſign; the fact *itſelf*, I apprehend, is nothing at all to the point in queſtion: becauſe the moſt *excellent* and *uſeful* things in the world, thro' the *folly* and *perverſeneſs* of mankind, and the prevalency of *irregular paſſions*; thro' the *weakneſs* of ſome, and the *ſubtilty* and *vile* management of others; may be the *occaſions* of the groſſeſt corruptions. Thus *religion itſelf* has been made uſe of to

ſanctify cruelty, perfidiouſneſs, treaſons, murders, and the blackeſt enormities; and the *general notion* of *worſhipping God* has, *accidentally*, introduc'd ſuperſtition and idolatry. Perſons therefore, who think impartially, won't be inclin'd to argue from *events*, or the *abuſes* of things; but from their *direct* and natural tendency. And this is the true ſtate of the queſtion with reſpect to *poſitive duties*, whether *in themſelves*, and in their *direct conſequences*, they lead to *ſuperſtition*; or whether this be not an *accidental abuſe* of them (to which the *beſt* things are liable) quite contrary to their *natural influence*, which is to ſupport *true* and *rational* religion. If the author of *Chriſtianity* &c. could prove the former of theſe, it would be very much to his purpoſe; but what he has ſaid directly to this argument is but little, and, I think, of no great *weight*. Let us proceed however to examine it.

'Tis urg'd then, that " the ſuppoſing things " indifferent equally commanded with mat- " ters of morality, tends to make men be- " lieve they are alike neceſſary *". If he means by *equally commanded*, enjoin'd as of *equal importance*, this is undoubtedly true; but every one, that knows any thing of the doctrine of ſcripture, muſt know that this is *far* from being the caſe; poſitive duties being always repreſented as *inferior* and *ſub-*

* *Chriſtianity* &c. *p.* 149.

ſervient

servient to moral, and of no *significancy* or *value* in comparison with *justice*, *mercy*, *fidelity*, and other branches of the *law of nature*, which are of *supreme*, *eternal*, and *indispensable* obligation. Let the argument therefore be *justly* stated, and as I would suppose this author himself intended it, and 'twill run thus; that "the supposing things indifferent "to be commanded *as well as* matters of mo- "rality, tho they are declar'd to be of *far less* "importance, and of *no worth at all*, if they "don't promote a stricter regard to morality, "tends to make men believe they are *alike* "*necessary*, and lay an *equal* stress upon both." Which is, as if a man should say, that my telling another light and darkness are two *very different* things, has a tendency to make him think they are the *same*. One would rather be apt to conclude, that the enjoining one thing in *subordination* to another, and *constantly inculcating* that subordination, must have a *necessary* tendency, which, 'tis very strange, should *ever fail* of its effect, to make all, but *ideots* and *mad people*, believe, that they are of *vastly different* importance. And if it be likely that the bulk of mankind will always be so *indolent* and *thoughtless*, as to disregard such *plain* directions, *the plainest indeed* that can be given them, there is no *possible* guard against their falling into *superstition*; but, let what *caution* will be us'd, as long as there are *means* and *ends*, which must be allow'd upon the foot of *natural religion*, as well as of *revelation*, they "will put a greater stress on

"means,

" means, tho of ſome uſe in religion, than " their nature will bear; to the confound- " ing things of the greateſt moment with " thoſe of the ſmalleſt *.".

AGAIN: 'Tis ſaid farther, that becauſe " ſenſible things make a deeper impreſſion " on the minds of the common people than " words; that is a juſt reaſon againſt their " uſe in religion †." The deeper impreſſion itſelf can certainly be no reaſon *againſt*, but rather for them; becauſe it muſt undeniably be of great uſe, if it be *corrected* and *bounded* by reaſon, and does not produce *ſuperſtition* and *enthuſiaſm*. But this will be the effect, " becauſe the vulgar, who gene- " rally look no farther than externals, do " not uſe them barely, as they do words, " to expreſs their meaning; but conceive " in them I know not what internal holi- " neſs; and think ſuch ſymbolical repreſen- " tations as neceſſary as the things repreſent- " ed by them; nay, by degrees, forgetting " the reaſon of their inſtitution, come to " idolize them, as the *Iſraelites* did the bra- " zen ſerpent ‡." This is ſtill arguing only from *facts*, and not from the *natural tendency* of things; whereas the true queſtion is, whether the revelation has not laid down very *plain* rules to prevent ſuch *miſapprehenſions*, by declaring, that inſtituted rites have no

* *Chriſtianity* &c. *p.* 150. † Pag. 172, 173.
‡ *Chriſtianity* &c. *p.* 173.

ſanctity

sanctity in them, and are no better than any the most *useless* and *trifling* ceremonies, if they don't promote *moral* goodness; and consequently, whether the common people, if they would use their reason, might not easily avoid such *groundless* and *superstitious* conceits? If it be said, that we may argue however with probability, that those abuses *will always* happen, because they *ever have* happen'd " in all religions whatever, where sym- " bolical representations have been used *:" I answer, that as the design of revelation is to teach men *otherwise*; as it is a very *plain* and *sufficient* rule for this purpose, which if they give the *least attention* to, they will be *better inform'd*; God is not answerable for *consequences*. If *superstition* be so much the *foible* of mankind, as indeed the experience of every age testifies, all that can be expected from the wise governour of the world is, that if he communicates a revelation, *proper care* will be taken to *prevent* it. Now this is, in *reason*, as *effectually* done by declaring, that all external rites are in themselves of no *account*, and have no *virtue* but what they derive from a *subserviency* to their end; as if *none but moral things* were made a part of religion. There is no more foundation for it, *really*, in the *one* case, than in the *other*; and by the same means that it prevails *now*, it would also prevail if *any other* rule was given, the *plainest* and *simplest* that can be

* *Christianity* &c. *p.* 173.

thought

thought of. For as the matter ſtands at preſent, if men would *think*, they muſt certainly avoid all ſuch hurtful errors; and if they will not, beſides that their religion is good for nothing, how can they be ſecur'd, upon any *poſſible* ſuppoſition, from the *groſſeſt extravagancies?*

OUR author has one paſſage more upon this head, which indeed is very *extraordinary*. "As long (he ſays) as men believe "the good of ſociety is the ſupreme law, "they will think it their duty to be go- "vern'd by that law; and believing God "requires nothing of them but what is for "the good of mankind, will place the whole "of their religion in benevolent actions, and "to the utmoſt of their abilities copy after "the divine original; but if they are made "to believe there are things, which have *no* "*relation* to this good, neceſſary to ſalva- "tion; they muſt ſuppoſe it their duty, to "uſe ſuch means as will moſt effectually "ſerve this purpoſe. —— 'Tis to this prin- "ciple we owe the moſt cruel perſecutions, "inquiſitions, cruſades, and maſſacres; tu- "mults, ſeditions, rebellions, &c*." *i. e.* "If "men are made to believe there are things, "which have no relation to the good of "ſociety [or which do no good, or harm] "neceſſary to ſalvation; they muſt ſuppoſe "it their duty to uſe ſuch means as will

* *Chriſtianity* &c. *p.* 151, 152.

"moſt

" moſt effectually ſerve this purpoſe [of do-
" ing neither good nor hurt;] and upon
" this principle of doing *no miſchief*, do *all*
" *the miſchief they can*, and perſecute and
" deſtroy their fellow-creatures." Does it follow, that becauſe God commands ſome things, which, if in themſelves they *have no relation to the good of ſociety*, are not *hurtful*; the people muſt naturally be led to think, that 'tis not only an *innocent* thing (which itſelf is going a *prodigious length*) but their *duty* to commit the vileſt injuſtice and cruelty? If they can draw ſuch inferences as theſe, they are not capable of being *inſtructed*, nor fit to be *reaſon'd* with. I might add, that none of the poſitive inſtitutions of *Chriſtianity* are of the kind this author ſpeaks of, but have all a tendency to promote *morality* (and one of them, in particular, the moſt *univerſal*, *diſintereſted*, and *generous* benevolence) and conſequently the *greateſt good* of mankind.

But my deſign in citing this paſſage was not to argue againſt it, the defect in the reaſoning being too *groſs* to eſcape any reader's notice, who *thinks at all* of what he reads; let it therefore ſerve only as a ſpecimen (I chuſe to cenſure in the moſt *modeſt* and *favourable* manner) how apt even *ingenious diſputants* are, in the heat of controverſy, to *overſhoot* themſelves; and impoſe upon their own *better underſtandings* ſo far, as to *join* ideas together that have in nature no *connection*,

nection, or dependance; and put things into the *conclusion*, for which there is not the least foundation in the *premises*. A method of arguing, by the way, whereby *any thing* may be concluded from *any thing*; nay, even *contraries* made to infer each other. Having shewn thus largely that instituted religion is not, *in itself*, superstition; and if *rightly* understood, (and the revelation is so *plain*, that 'tis very *unaccountable* that any should take it *wrong*) has no more a *tendency* to superstition, than natural religion itself; I shall conclude this chapter with observing,

3. That Christianity, as it requires only *two* or *three plain* and *useful* positive duties; and strictly obliges its professors not to *add* to them, by declaring against all *impositions* *, and asserting more particularly, that the religion enjoin'd in the gospel is *pure* and *spiritual* †, not to be incumber'd and corrupted by *human forms* and *ceremonies*, nay, that we *worship* God *in vain*, if we *teach for doctrines the commandments of men* ‡; Christianity, I say, seems, by these things, to have guarded more *effectually* against enthusiasm and superstition, than if it had explicitly requir'd *only moral* duties, and left it to every man's *fancy* to invent the *means* of religion for himself. For, by this *excellent* constitution, all the means of religion, being of God's appoint-

* Rom. xiv. 2, 3, 4, 5. Gal. v. 1, 13. † John iv. 23, 24. ‡ Mat. xv. 9.

ing,

ing, will be *wise* and *rational*; and if men understand, and resolve to follow the directions of the revelation, nothing that is *weak* and *enthusiastical* can be introduc'd. But if every one be allow'd to act according to his *private opinion*, and *humour*; or as he is influenc'd by his *fears*, and *foolish* notions of the Deity; he may (and there are many circumstances supposeable, in which 'tis probable he *will*) run the utmost lengths of an *unbounded* and *endless superstition.*

CHAP.

CHAP. V.

A particular *vindication of the* peculiar *poſitive inſtitutions of* Chriſtianity.

'TIS one great excellency of the Chriſtian revelation, that its poſitive inſtitutions are very *few*, as well as admirably calculated to *promote* and *encourage* the practice of virtue; ſo that our religion is not *incumber'd* with ceremonies, nor are our minds diverted from more *important* and *uſeful* duties; the *main ſubſtance* of Chriſtianity being the law of nature explain'd upon the nobleſt principles, and inforc'd by the ſtrongeſt motives. But it will naturally be aſk'd, if the *fewer* the *better*, would it not be *beſt* of all if there were *none?* That does not follow, becauſe two or three may be very *helpful*, (eſpecially if we conſider, that a revelation, deſign'd to be of *univerſal* advantage, muſt be calculated chiefly for the *vulgar*; and if it was ſuited to the taſte of the *few*, in every age, who think and reaſon more *cloſely* and *abſtractedly*, it would, with reſpect to the bulk of mankind, be *uſeleſs*) two or three poſitive precepts, I ſay, may be very *helpful*, when a great number would be *burthenſom*, and perhaps too much engage the attention.——However, if this inference will not hold,

hold, does not the observation which has been made reflect on the *Mosaic* institution, in the same proportion as it does honour to the *Christian?* If it be a circumstance very much *in favour* of the latter, must it not be a great *prejudice* against the former, which was a law abounding in *ceremonies*, and *ritual observances?* I answer, that it undoubtedly proves the *superior excellency* of the Christian religion; but, I apprehend, will not conclude what the adversaries of revelation would infer from it, *viz.* that the law of *Moses* was not of *divine original.* For though when God gives a revelation that is design'd for *general* use, and consequently considers men only as *reasonable creatures*, and is not adapted to the *genius*, *complexion*, or *state* of any particular nation, 'tis natural to expect that it will be *plain* and *simple*, and not overloaded with things of an *external* and *positive* nature; yet there are circumstances supposeable, in which even a *ceremonious* religion may answer very valuable purposes. And this I take to have been the case with respect to the *Jewish rites.*

God, who was not oblig'd to give an external revelation *at all*, nor consequently to make it *universal*, thought fit, in his infinite wisdom (after having reveal'd himself, at sundry times, to particular persons) to chuse the posterity of *Abraham*, as a reward of his *signal* piety and *extraordinary* virtue, in order to preserve amongst them the ac-

knowledgment and worſhip of himſelf as the *one true* God, and the principles of natural religion (which were almoſt loſt, in other nations, by the *univerſal* increaſe of *idolatry* and *ſuperſtition*) *pure* and *uncorrupt*, till the time came, which he had fix'd for a more *general* reformation; and order'd it ſo in the courſe of his providence, that by their *captivities*, *diſperſions*, and the *tranſlation* of the books of their religion into *Greek*, &c. the revelation he had afforded them might be of ſome uſe to the *Gentile* world; both by ſcattering here and there good principles and notions of natural religion; and raiſing, throughout the *Eaſt*, about the time of our Saviour's coming, a pretty common expectation of an *extraordinary* perſon, to appear in *Judea*. The end therefore, which God had in view, not being attainable, without preſerving them a *diſtinct* people, in their *religion*, *cuſtoms*, and *manners*, from other nations, the *law of ceremonies* was inſtituted with this view; and if it was the moſt *likely method* to anſwer the great purpoſe for which it was intended, that will be a ſufficient vindication of the *wiſdom* of it.

And, I think, there will be no great difficulty in proving this, if we conſider how the *Jews* were *circumſtanc'd*. A people who had been ſtrongly *prejudic'd* in favour of *idolatrous* and *ſuperſtitious* cuſtoms by living in *Egypt*, in thoſe early ages of the world the moſt famous *ſeat* and *nurſery* of ſuperſtition; who affected

affected a religion of *pomp* and *ceremony*; were incompassed on all sides by *idolaters*; and appear to have been *inclin'd*, upon *all occasions*, to fall in with the *idolatry* of the neighbouring nations: a people, I say, so *situated* and *disposed*, would probably have kept no order, if their *national weakness* and *prejudices* had not been in some measure indulg'd: And the best security against their joining in the *idolatrous rites* that prevail'd all around 'em, and renouncing the worship of the *true* God, was to divert them, by giving them *innocent ceremonies of their own*; which, besides, as they were practis'd in honour of *him*, kept up a constant sense of *his authority*, and, upon that account, must have a natural tendency to *settle* and *establish* their minds. In like manner, *those rites* which were design'd to hinder their *free commerce* with other nations, and imitating the customs and usages among them *especially*, which had any *relation* to their superstition, must have been wisely adapted to the *state* and *circumstance* of things; because an imitation of the *manners* of the *Gentiles*, and contracting an *intimacy* and *familiarity* with them, would have led *naturally*, and almost *insensibly*, to the practice of their *idolatries*: and 'tis evident that rites and ordinances of this kind are a *great part* of the *Mosaic* institution.

I MIGHT add, that several things which are reckon'd to belong to the *religion* of the *Jews*, were only branches of their *civil con-*

ſtitution; and farther, that as we are able to aſſign a good reaſon in *general*, from their *temper*, *prejudices*, *ſituation*, and the *wiſe views* of providence in preſerving them a *ſeparate* people, why they ſhould be indulged in a *ceremonious* worſhip, as being the *ſureſt way* to keep them at the greateſt diſtance from the manners and cuſtoms of their *idolatrous* neighbours; ſo, 'tis not at all unlikely, that if we were thoroughly acquainted with the circumſtances of *thoſe times*, we might ſee a *particular* reaſon for chuſing the ceremonies that were appointed above others; and nothing ſtrange, if in a period, where we have ſcarce any light from hiſtory to direct our inquiries, we can't account *diſtinctly* for every inſtitution.

But as this whole affair is a ſort of *digreſſion* from my main deſign, I would not enlarge upon it; and ſhall therefore only make one obſervation more, *viz.* that leſt the people ſhould be diverted, by the *multitude* of *rites* to which they were oblig'd, from an *attention* to thoſe infinitely more important duties, in which the *eſſence* of true religion muſt *always* conſiſt; and lay ſo much ſtreſs upon *ceremonial* inſtitutions, as to depreciate and neglect *immutable moral* obligations; all *poſſible care* is taken, in the writings of the Old Teſtament, to guard againſt ſuch *ſuperſtitious abuſes*. The ſubſtance of religion is expreſly declar'd to lie in thoſe things *only*, which are *intrinſically* good; and poſitive inſtitutions

ſtitutions to be mere *inſignificant trifles* in compariſon of *piety*, *juſtice*, and *mercy*; nay, to be even *offenſive* and *abominable* in the ſight of God, when they are put upon a *level* with the *eternal laws* of *natural religion*. The ſentiments upon this ſubject are the *juſteſt*, *ſtrongeſt*, and moſt *ſublime* that can be found any where, and frequently inculcated by prophets rais'd up for *that very purpoſe*; ſo that 'twas nothing but *wiful perverſeneſs* that made the *Jews* ſo zealous for their *ceremonies*, to the contempt and ſubverſion of *morality*; and even the *weakeſt* among them, if they had read their *own ſcriptures* with the *leaſt care*, could not have fallen into ſuch a pernicious error, which is ſo *explicitly* and *directly* condemn'd.

I PROCEED now to what I at firſt propoſed, "a *particular* vindication of the *peculiar* poſitive inſtitutions of Chriſtianity;" and in this I need be but ſhort, becauſe it will immediately appear, upon their being *truly* ſtated and explain'd, that they are *entirely ſubſervient* to *morality*; the *ſtrongeſt obligations* upon us to the practice of *univerſal virtue*; and have a *direct* tendency to encourage and ſtrengthen the *beſt* and moſt *uſeful* diſpoſitions of human nature; diſpoſitions that will make men moſt *amiable* and *eaſy* in themſelves, and moſt *agreeable* and *beneficial* to others.

By *baptism* we *voluntarily*, and in the most *solemn* manner, make a profession of the Christian religion: And as it is done *freely*, and from *choice*, we *necessarily oblige* ourselves by this action to imitate the *life* of Christ, and govern our temper and behaviour by *the rules* he has prescrib'd, *i. e.* to copy after the most *perfect* example, and practise the most *entire*, *generous*, and *useful* virtue, that was ever prescrib'd by any scheme of *philosophy*, or institution of *religion:* We *oblige* ourselves to that *rational piety*, *impartial justice*, *universal disinterested* and *condescending goodness*, and *strict temperance*, which Christianity so clearly recommends, and powerfully inforces; expecting, upon *these terms only*, the favour of almighty God, and an happy immortality. And can any thing be more *becoming* rational beings, than to bring themselves under the *strictest obligations* to promote the *true dignity* and *perfection* of their nature, and the *general good* of their fellow creatures?

If it be said, that our *very profession* of the Christian religion *obliges* us to all this, without the use of any particular *rite* or *ceremony?* I answer, that doing it by a *solemn rite*, and in a *public* manner, will be an *additional* motive, with all who have a sense of *ingenuity*, to perform their voluntary engagements; that the doing it in a way *appointed by God*, and in obedience to *his com-*

mand, has a natural tendency to make them more *sincere* in their resolutions, give them a more *lively sense* of their obligations, and leave a *deeper impression* upon the mind: And besides, by appointing a *particular rite*, and making it mens duty to submit to it, *every man* is put, at his first setting out in religion, upon *examining* the *evidences* of it, and the *different natures* and *consequences* of virtue and vice; by which means his religion will become the matter of his *deliberate* and *free* choice. For though the bulk of mankind go on in the *beaten track*, and because they are never *call'd upon* to make a particular inquiry, take their religion *implicitly*, just as the *chance* of *education* and *custom* directs; yet one would imagine, that when they are bound, by a *ceremony instituted on purpose*, to make a solemn profession of it, this should *always* suggest to them, that now is the *proper time* to consider seriously upon what foundation it stands, and the reasons by which it is supported; and whatever the *real fact* be, I am sure it is the *natural tendency* of the thing: And therefore it must be calculated, in *itself*, to answer the most *useful* purposes, because nothing can be of greater importance towards making men *fix'd* and *steady* in a virtuous course, than their entring upon it after *mature deliberation*, and a *full conviction* of the judgment.

And if there are these uses of *some particular rite*, it will be a sufficient justification

of *any ſingle one*, that it is as fit as *any other*, and does not interfere with the *main deſign* of the inſtitution. This, I ſay, is as much as can, in *ſtrict reaſon*, be requir'd. But, beyond this, it may be urg'd in favour of *baptiſm*, the *initiating ceremony* of the Chriſtian religion, that it is, *itſelf*, the moſt *natural* and *ſignificant* that can be, and *expreſſive* of thoſe very obligations, which we bring ourſelves under by ſubmitting to it. This is ſtrongly repreſented by St. *Paul* in the following paſſage (if we underſtand by *baptiſm* the rite that was *originally* appointed, and *always* practiſed in the *firſt* Chriſtian churches, *viz. immerſion*; otherwiſe, indeed, the *beauty* and *force* of the compariſon is entirely loſt) *Know ye not, that ſo many of us as were baptized into Jeſus Chriſt, were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him, by baptiſm, into death; that like as Chriſt was raiſed up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even ſo we alſo ſhould walk in newneſs of life* *.

I NEED not ſet myſelf to prove, that this is a *rite* which may *generally be practiſed without inconvenience*, and conſequently is fit to be enjoin'd in a religion deſign'd for *all ages* and *nations*; becauſe the *conſtant experience* of thoſe who uſe it, adhering *ſtrictly* to the *original* inſtitution, is a moſt convincing demonſtration of this; amongſt whom, not-

* Rom. vi. 3, 4.

with-

withstanding some instances of a *precipitate* and *incautious* zeal, *it scarce ever is*, and if but *common prudence* was exercis'd, we have the utmost reason to believe, never would *at all be*, attended with ill consequences; and besides, an attempt of this kind would be *trifling* with the reader in an age, in which the practice of *cold-bathing* is so frequently recommended even to the most *tender* constitutions, and acknowledg'd to have such *excellent effects*.

UPON the whole, there is every circumstance, in this *positive institution* of Christianity, that can *recommend* it, and manifest the great *wisdom* and *goodness* of God in appointing it. The *general design* of it is to *oblige* Christians, in the most *solemn* manner, to a conduct that is *becoming* rational creatures, conducive to the *rectitude* of human nature, and the *good* of society, *viz.* to abstain from vice and impurity of *all kinds*, and practise the most *universal*, *constant*, and *amiable* virtue.——The *fixing* a *particular rite* is of great use, to engage their *attention*, and give them a *stronger sense* of their obligations, and as it binds ALL to a *voluntary* and *deliberate* engagement to lead a *sober*, *righteous*, and *godly* life.—— As the *substance* of the duty, or the *principal* thing intended by it, must *always* be *useful*, the *external ceremony itself* is of that kind, as may *generally be practis'd*, not only without *inconvenience*, but with *advantage*, and is withal very *natural* and *significant*, and wisely

ly *adapted* to the main design. —— To which we may add, that there is the *utmost care* taken to prevent *superstitious abuses* of it, not only by asserting, *in general*, the utter *insignificancy* of all instituted means without real virtue and goodness; and constantly inculcating the *moral use* of this particular institution; but by declaring in express terms, that 'tis not the *external* part of baptism, *putting away the filth of the flesh*, for which we are consider'd as good Christians, and intitled to the reward of eternal life, *but the answer of a good conscience towards God**.

ANOTHER positive institution of Christianity is what we commonly call the *Lord's supper*. And as, in this ordinance, the death of Christ is *commemorated* under the notion of a *sacrifice*, I shall, before I specify the *moral uses* of it, endeavour briefly to explain and vindicate *that representation*: Which is the more necessary, because nothing in the whole Christian doctrine has been more *grossly* misrepresented, or given its adversaries, who take their accounts of it from *party writers*, and not from the *New Testament* itself (a method of proceeding that argues great *unfairness* and *prejudice*) a more *plausible* occasion to triumph. But if the matter be rightly consider'd, it will appear, that the advantages, which they think they have against the Christian religion upon this head, are but *imaginary*. For,

* 1 Pet. iii. 21.

I. THE

* 1. THE New Testament no where represents God as a *rigorous inexorable* being, who insisted upon *full satisfaction* for the sins of men, before he could be induc'd to offer *terms* of *reconciliation.* It says, indeed, not one word of *satisfaction,* much less of *strict* and *adequate* satisfaction; not a syllable of the *infinite evil of sin*; of *infinite justice*; the *hypostatical union,* or *the deity's being so united to the man Christ Jesus, as that the two infinitely distinct natures constitute one person,* and, *by virtue of this union, giving an infinite value to the sufferings of the human nature, and enabling it to pay a strict equivalent to God's offended vindictive justice.* All this, I say, is the *invention* of more *modern* ages (who, by *subtil* distinctions, and *metaphysical* obscurities, have *deform'd* true Christianity to such a degree, that scarce any of its *original features* appear) and bears not the *least similitude* to the language of the New Testament; in which the Divine Being is always describ'd as *slow to anger, merciful* and *condescending* to the frailties and infirmities of mankind; and *forgiveness of sin* represented, not as a thing for which a *price* of *equal value* was paid, and which might consequently be demanded in *strict justice,* but as a *voluntary* act of *pure* favour, and the effect of *free* and *undeserved* goodness. Nay, farther,

* *For a defence of the author against misrepresentations, and a clearer and fuller account of the doctrine of Christ's sacrifice, the reader is referr'd to the* Postscript.

2. THE

2. THE New Teſtament never aſſerts, that God could not have pardon'd ſin *without a ſacrifice*, nor conſequently, that the *death* of Chriſt, conſider'd in *that view*, was, upon any account, *abſolutely neceſſary*. If indeed it be prov'd, that this method is of *divine appointment*, this will and ought to ſatisfy us, that there are *wiſe reaſons* for it; but it can't be inferr'd from hence, that 'twas *abſolutely neceſſary*, or that the ſame wiſe purpoſes might not have been as effectually anſwer'd *ſome other* way. Nor,

3. DOES the Chriſtian religion any where expreſly declare, or ſo much as intimate to us, that natural reaſon could not diſcover God to be a *propitious* being, and ready to be reconcil'd to his guilty creatures upon their *repentance*; but, on the contrary, lays down this as the *fundamental* point of all religion, and conſequently as a principle that might be argued with great *probability*, that *God is a rewarder of them who diligently ſeek him* *; and ſuppoſes, that the great goodneſs which he has demonſtrated in the general conſtitution of things, and courſe of providence, was a *rational encouragement* to the *Gentile* world to ſerve and worſhip him, in hopes of *acceptance* and *mercy*.

4. IT is of great importance to obſerve, that the death of Chriſt (as far as appears) would have happen'd, if it had never been

* Heb. xi. 6.

deſign'd as a *ſacrifice*; and conſequently was not appointed *arbitrarily* and *ſolely* with a view to that. The true ſtate of the caſe ſeems to be this. The wiſe and merciful God, having compaſſion on the *ignorance* and *degeneracy* of the world, determin'd, at a certain time fix'd by his infinite wiſdom, to interpoſe; and when they had corrupted the *religion of nature*, and were not likely to recover the right knowledge of it, teach them their duty by an *external revelation*. The perſon, whom he choſe to be his meſſenger, is characteriz'd as his *Son*, an *innocent* perſon of great *dignity* and *excellence*, whom he had *before* employ'd in the moſt important tranſactions, and who was highly *belov'd* and *favour'd* by him; and the principal * reaſon of his employing one ſo *extraordinary* as his miniſter upon this occaſion, we are told in the New Teſtament, was to conciliate greater *attention* and *regard* to his doctrine †. We are to take it therefore, I think, that the * *firſt* view of God in ſending Chriſt into the world was, that, as a *prophet*, he might reſtore the true religion, and publiſh the glad tidings of *life* and *immortality*, and by this means reform the errors and vices of mankind.

But as he was ſent to preach a moſt *ſtrict* and *holy* doctrine among a people abominably *corrupt* and *vitious*; to recommend a *rational* and *ſpiritual* worſhip of the Deity to thoſe who were fond of *form* and *ceremony*, and

† Matth. xxi. 37. Heb. i. 1, 2. *chap.* ii. 2, 3.

* *See* the Poſtſcript, *p.* 349.

reſolv'd

resolv'd the whole of religion into *external rites*, and *traditional superstitions*; and assum'd the character of their *Messiah*, or king, when both his circumstances in life, and the religion he taught, contradicted the expectations they had entertain'd of *temporal pomp* and *grandeur* under the *Messiah*'s government, and consequently disappointed all the views of their *covetousness* and *ambition*; he gain'd *comparatively* but few converts, and was abus'd and persecuted by the *priests* and men in *power*, whom the multitude *blindly* follow'd; and at last put to death with great torment and ignominy. From this plain, and *unquestionably true*, account of the fact it appears, that his suffering was the *natural consequence* of attempting to reform the manners of a degenerate age, and opposing the superstition and darling prejudices of the *Jewish* nation; and could not be avoided but by such a *compliance* on his part, as would have been inconsistent with *virtue* and *integrity*, or by a *miraculous* interposition of providence. And God, who *foresaw* all this, appointed that the death of Christ, which really happen'd in the *natural course* of things, should be consider'd as a *sacrifice*.

Let me observe by the way, that by considering the matter in this light, all objections against the justice of God, in determining that an *innocent* person should suffer for the *guilty*, are entirely obviated. For the death of Christ was not appointed *absolutely* and

and *arbitrarily* with this view; but, which is vastly different, and can't sure have the least appearance of *injustice*, it fell out just as other events do, in the *common course* of things; and all that can be *immediately* attributed to God in the whole affair is, that he sent him into the world, though he *foresaw* the consequences of it; and order'd that his death, which would have happen'd, without a *miracle*, if there had been no such design, should be regarded as a *sacrifice*. Though, I must own, I can't see, if the matter had been *otherwise*, how it could be *unjust*, or *tyrannical*, to propose even to an *innocent* person to suffer, with his own *free consent*, in order to promote so great a good; especially if we suppose, what the Christian revelation expressly teaches in the present case, that he would be *gloriously* and *amply* rewarded for it. Having thus remov'd all the difficulties of any moment that lie against this doctrine, the only thing that remains is to shew, what *wise ends* might be serv'd by it.

I SHALL not inquire into the *original* of *expiatory sacrifices*, which were as early in the world as the first accounts of history; whether they were owing to an *express appointment* of God, as may seem probable from the History of *Moses*; or had their rise from the *fears* and *superstition* of mankind; who being *uneasy* under a sense of *guilt*, *confus'd* in their reasonings about the *goodness* of the Deity, and *uncertain* whether he would accept

cept them, notwithstanding past offences, upon their repentance and reformation *only* (though, I make no doubt, they might have argued this truth, with a good deal of *probability*, even from the *light of nature)* would naturally fly to every little *expedient*, that their *bewilder'd* imaginations suggested might be *proper*; and so began first with sacrificing *brute creatures*; and afterwards, as their *distrust* and *fears* increased, had recourse, in many *Heathen* nations, to the abominable practice of *human sacrifices:* Which shews plainly, that their reason was more and more *perplex'd*, and *corrupted* and *darken'd* to a prodigious degree, with respect to the very *fundamental* principles of religion and virtue.

If *sacrificing* was entirely an *human invention*, 'twill be hard to give any account of it, more than of innumerable other *superstitions*, which, in the darkness and extreme depravity of the *Pagan* world, almost *universally* prevail'd. *Human sacrifices* are a disgrace to our nature, as well as in the highest degree dishonourable to God. And for *others*, there is no foundation at all in *reason* to suppose, that they could *expiate* the guilt of *moral* offences, or be of the *least efficacy* towards re-instating the sinner in the divine favour. On the other hand, if *sacrifices* were originally of *divine* appointment, they could not be design'd to *propitiate* the Deity, because the very institution of them ne-

necessarily suppos'd that he was *already* propitious. For what end then were they ordained? Was it because the all-wise and merciful governour of the world delighted in the *blood* of *innocent* animals? or was he fond of being serv'd with great *expence* and *ceremony?* These are *low* and *unworthy* conceptions of him. All the uses therefore that 'twas possible, in *reason*, for sacrifices to serve, or consequently, that they could be design'd to answer, if they were of *divine* original, may, I think, be reduc'd to these two; *viz.* keeping up a firm belief of God's *reconcileableness*, and being ready to *forgive* his guilty creatures upon their *repentance*; and, at the same time, a strong sense of the *evil* of sin, and their own *demerit* upon the account of it. In this view of *standing memorials*, and *testimonies* to the most important truths, they might be very *useful*; but *proper expiations* they neither were, nor could be, whether they began from *superstition*, or *immediate revelation.*

And now the death of Christ may be very *fitly* represented as a *sacrifice*, nay, described in the *strongest* sacrifical phrases, since it answer'd *completely* all the *rational* purposes, that *expiatory sacrifices* could ever serve. 'Tis a *standing memorial* of God's being *propitious*, and inclin'd, as the Christian revelation assures us, not only to forgive sin *in part*, but *entirely*; and not only to remit the *whole* of the punishment which the sinner had deserv'd,

but, moreover, to bestow on him the glorious reward of *eternal happiness* upon his sincere repentance and reformation, and persevering in a virtuous course: So that it removes the *uncertainty* of our natural reasonings, and is wisely calculated to maintain, in *all ages*, a firm belief of that *fundamental* principle of ALL religion, which mens *superstitious fears* had very much corrupted and darken'd; and gives the *strongest possible* encouragement to virtue.

AGAIN, the death of Christ consider'd under the notion of a *sacrifice* will be, to the end of the world, a most *lively memorial* of the *evil* and *demerit* of sin. Nay, as God, in his infinite wisdom, has order'd it in such a manner, that nothing *less* should be consider'd as the sacrifice for the sins of the world, than the death of a person so *dear* to him, and of such *transcendent* dignity and excellence; he has, by this appointment, declar'd much more *strongly* his *displeasure* against sin, and what the *sinner himself* deserv'd to suffer, and cut off more *effectually*, from wilful and impenitent offenders, all ground of *presumptuous hope* and *confidence* in his mercy, than 'twas possible to do by *any sacrifices* of *brute* creatures. So that by the way in which he has condescended to pardon us, there is the utmost discouragement given to *vice*, and the greatest care taken, that could be by any method whatever, to preserve the *honour* of the divine government,

and

and the *reverence* due to the authority of its laws. For besides what hath been already suggested, a sense of our *ill deserts* upon account of our transgressions, of which the death of Christ, represented as a sacrifice, is a most *affecting* memorial, has a natural tendency to inspire us with the deepest *humility*, and fill us with *shame* and *remorse* for having deviated from the rule of right, and consequently, to make us more *circumspect* and *regular* in our future behaviour; and a sense of God's *great goodness* in *freely* forgiving our offences, when we had merited quite the contrary, must, if we have any sentiments of *gratitude* or *honour*, make us solicitous to *please*, and fearful of *offending* him.

If it be ask'd, how the *death* of Christ can answer the purpose of an *expiatory sacrifice*, when it happen'd in the *natural course* of things, and was not appointed *directly*, and *only*, with that view? I answer, that such sacrifices being never design'd to *propitiate* the Deity, or as *proper expiations*; but only as *memorials*, in the manner above explain'd; there is no difficulty in accounting for it. For, in all other cases, it was only God's *appointing*, and *accepting* the sacrifice that made it a proper *memorial*; otherwise it could have no significancy, but what the *fancy* and *superstition* of men suggested. The use of sacrifices therefore depending entirely on *his institution* of them; or, at least, the use of those which were directly of his

ordaining being *that*, and *that only*, which he intended; it follows, in the very nature of the thing, that if he is pleas'd to call the *death* of Chriſt a *ſacrifice*, and would have it conſider'd under that *character*, it muſt be a *fit memorial* of all he deſign'd ſhould be repreſented by it. And beſides, it has been ſhewn, that there are ſeveral circumſtances which render it a more *uſeful memorial*, than *any other* ſacrifices that were ever offer'd.

LET me add to what has been ſaid concerning the advantages of conſidering the death of Chriſt as a ſacrifice in *general*, that by its being deſcrib'd as the *one offering*, which has *perfected for ever them that are ſanctified**, the Chriſtian religion has guarded, in the moſt *effectual* manner, againſt the *uſe* of ALL ſacrifices for the future; and particularly againſt *human ſacrifices*, one of the moſt *monſtrous* corruptions of any thing which has born the name of *religion*, that ever appear'd in the world. And I would hope, that even its adverſaries will allow this to be a great argument in its favour; that it was ſo *wiſely ſuited* to the *ſtate* of the world at that time; and not only *aboliſh'd* ſacrificing, but, in a way, accommodated in ſome meaſure to the *general conceptions* and *prejudices* of mankind, and conſequently the more likely to take, guarded againſt the *revival* of a cuſtom afterwards (preſerving however all the

* Heb. x. 14.

rational uſes of it) which had been the ſource of *infinite ſuperſtition.*

SHOULD it be ſaid, that there is no *need* of ſuch *memorials* as ſacrifices were, and the *death* of Chriſt is repreſented to be; becauſe if the Chriſtian religion had aſſerted *clearly*, that God is a *propitious* being, and particularly expreſs'd the *terms*, upon which his guilty creatures might be *reconcil'd* to him; if it had declar'd *abſolutely* againſt the uſe of ALL ſacrifices, and condemn'd eſpecially the barbarity and inhumanity of *human ſacrifices*; this alone would have been *ſufficient*: I anſwer, that it might indeed have been ſufficient; but how does it appear, (which is the point on which the argument *wholly* turns,) that the appointing a *memorial* of theſe things, in the ſacrifice of Chriſt, is *uſeleſs?* Thus much is undeniable, that theſe things don't in the leaſt *interfere*; but beſides, the great end in view was *moſt likely* to be ſecur'd by making uſe both of poſitive declarations, and a ſtanding memorial that will naturally give *light* to, and *ſtrengthen*, each other. To which we may add, that the ſuperſtition of men will in ſome circumſtances pervert the *plaineſt words*; but 'tis not ſo eaſy to evade the deſign of a *memorial*, eſpecially in that very way, *viz.* under the notion of a *ſacrifice*, to which their ſuperſtition would directly tend.

THERE is nothing, that I can find, advanc'd by the author of *Chriſtianity* &c. upon this head, but what has been fully *obviated*, or goes upon the *common miſtakes* of the ſcripture doctrine of Chriſt's ſacrifice. Only whereas he ſays, " that the reaſons aſſign'd " for it could never influence thoſe, who ne- " ver heard of Chriſt *;" I allow it. But what then? Is it not enough that they may be of great uſe to thoſe who *have heard* of him? Nay, the doctrine of Chriſt's being *a propitiation for the ſins of the whole world* is not therefore *uſeleſs*, becauſe a *great part* of the world know nothing of it, ſince it is of the higheſt *moral* advantage to thoſe who enjoy the chriſtian revelation; as it repreſents to them the *univerſal* goodneſs of the *common* father of mankind, and that *in every nation, he that feareth God, and worketh righteouſneſs, is accepted with him*; and conſequently encourages *univerſal benevolence*, and an *eſteem* of the *whole* rational creation, however diſtinguiſh'd by *external* privileges; and reſtrains that *ſpiritual pride* and *inſolence*, which prompts many chriſtians, to the *reproach* of our holy religion (and is indeed too common in *all religious ſects*, who imagine the *ſuperiority* to be on their ſide) to confine the favour of God to *themſelves*, and deſpiſe, cenſure, and condemn *all others*.

* *Chriſtianity* &c. *p.* 418.

I PROCEED now to point out a few of the *excellencies*, and eminent *advantages*, of that *positive institution* of Christianity, in which we commemorate the *death* of Christ; and particularly under the character of a *sacrifice*. And the moral uses of it are so *plain*, and withal so *various*, and *exceeding great*, that it may be question'd, whether any thing of a *positive* nature can possibly be appointed, that has a stronger tendency to promote the practice of virtue; nay, as will sufficiently appear by just enumerating them, of the most *amiable*, *generous*, and *heroic* virtue.

IN general, as we perform this service in *honour* of Christ, we thereby, as well as by baptism, solemnly profess our belief of his religion, and consequently engage to make it the *rule* of our behaviour. —— But to mention some of its *peculiar* advantages. *Frequently commemorating* the death of Christ, as a sacrifice for sin, must maintain in us a *constant firm belief* of that first principle even of natural religion, that God is ready to forgive all sincere penitents, and *a rewarder of them that diligently seek him*; and at the same time, as it sets before us our own great *demerit*, must impress a *strong* and *lively* sense of the goodness of God, in *freely* pardoning our offences, and rewarding so abundantly our sincere though *imperfect* virtue; the natural consequence of which will be, *shame* for having

done amiſs, and affronted the government of ſo *gracious* and *compaſſionate* a being, and the higheſt *abhorrence* of ſuch an *ungenerous* conduct for the future. If we reflect with becoming gratitude on God's wonderful *benevolence* and *mercy* to mankind, 'tis impoſſible but this muſt produce a *chearful* obedience to all his commands; and eſpecially, a *delight* in *doing good* after his moſt excellent and perfect example. —— Again, when we remember, that the *very deſign* of the death of Chriſt was *to redeem us from all iniquity*, and make us *zealous of good works* *, and that, upon theſe terms *only*, we are to expect any advantage from it; nothing can have a more powerful tendency to excite to *ſtrict* and *univerſal* purity.

FARTHER, if we conſider our partaking of this ordinance as a *communion (the cup of bleſſing, which we bleſs, as the communion of the blood of Chriſt, and the bread, which we break, as the communion of the body of Chriſt,* †) by which we acknowledge ALL ſincere Chriſtians, however *denominated*, and *diſtinguiſhed*, as our *brethren*, members, together with ourſelves, of the ſame *ſpiritual body*, or *ſociety*, intitled to the ſame *privileges*, and having the ſame *hope of their calling*; that *we, being many, are one bread, and one body, becauſe we are all partakers of that one bread* ‡; this muſt be of excellent uſe to promote

* Tit. ii. 14. † 1 Cor. x. 16. ‡ Ver. 17.

mutual

mutual eſteem, concord, and *harmony*; and if the true intention of it was follow'd, would make Chriſtians regard one another according to their *real merit*, and not for the *trifling peculiarities* of any particular ſect; and effectually reconcile all *party-differences*: by which means, *impoſitions upon conſcience*, *violent controverſies*, *unſcriptural terms of communion*, *ſchiſms*, *perſecutions*, &c. which have been of fatal conſequence both to *religion*, and *civil ſociety*, would be entirely prevented. —— But leſt we ſhould ſtop here, and confine our benevolence to *the houſhold of faith*; conſidering the death of Chriſt as *a propitiation for the ſins of the whole world** will naturally inſpire an *univerſal* love of mankind. For there is an *irreſiſtible force* in the apoſtle's argument, *If God ſo loved us, we*, who are *dependent* upon, and *oblig'd* to, each other, and can't ſubſiſt without a *mutual intercourſe* of good offices, *ought* much more *to love one another* †.

INDEED, *commemorating* the *death* of Chriſt, in a devout and ſolemn manner, in its *entire* deſign, and with ALL its circumſtances, will ſuggeſt the *greateſt* and moſt *generous* ſentiments, and afford motives to the moſt *extenſive* and *heroic* benevolence, that mankind can poſſibly practiſe. For beſides what has been already hinted, if we conſider that God gave his Son to die for us while we

* 1 Jo. ii. 2. † Chap. iv. 11.

were

were *enemies**, this muſt kill all the ſeeds of *malice* and *revenge* in us; and raiſe ſuch a *noble ſpirit* of humanity and compaſſion, as the greateſt injuries ſhall not *bear down* and *extinguiſh*; which will be farther ſtrengthen'd by reflecting on the behaviour of Chriſt, who, under the greateſt abuſes and indignities, *pitied*, and *pray'd* for, his *perſecutors*. —— His example likewiſe, in chuſing *to die* rather than forfeit his integrity, and to promote the happineſs of mankind, will teach us, (and accordingly 'tis thus inculcated by St. *John*†) to ſacrifice all *private* conſiderations, nay, *life itſelf* for the *public good*; and beſides, has a tendency to beget in us an *entire ſubmiſſion* to providence under the worſt circumſtances that may befal us, and an *undaunted fortitude*, *reſolution*, and *conſtancy* of mind, when we are call'd to ſuffer in a *good* cauſe, and for the advancement of *truth* and *virtue*. —— And all theſe arguments will receive an *additional* force when we reflect, that the example we commemorate is that of a *friend* and *generous benefactor*, an example that is in itſelf *amiable*, and which we ſhould conſequently be *ambitious* to imitate; and from the *innocence* and *dignity* of the ſufferer.

As therefore it appears, that we can't commemorate the death of Chriſt, in the *manner* in which Chriſtianity has *commanded* it, without having our reſolutions to practiſe

* Rom. v. 10: † 1 Jo. iii. 16.

universal virtue strengthen'd, and improving in the *greatest*, most *amiable*, *useful*, and *godlike* dispositions, which this institution has a *peculiar* and most *admirable* aptitude to excite, and confirm; need I add any thing more to prove that 'tis *worthy* of God, a being of *absolute purity*, a being of most *perfect* and *universal goodness*? Or that 'tis becoming the wisdom of his providence, and suitable to the great end he has in view, the *rectitude* and *happiness* of the moral creation, to oblige us by a law made on purpose, and the practice of a *plain significant* rite, to enter frequently upon such reflections as are of the utmost *moral use*, and yet, without some institution of this kind (considering how little inclin'd the bulk of mankind are to think, unless they are *put* upon it) are likely to be *omitted*, or very much *neglected*; and besides, can't reasonably be expected to have that weight and influence in a *slight*, *cursory*, *occasional* meditation, as they will very probably, when they are consider'd as a *solemn act* of *devotion*, which we perform in obedience to an *express* divine command?

A THIRD thing of a *positive* nature in the Christian revelation is, *worshipping God through a mediator*. Now 'tis most evident, that the *general* notion of a *mediator between God and man* (the term being *indefinite*) can't in *itself* be *absurd*; but will be *irrational*, or *otherwise*, just as 'tis explain'd, and the *nature*, *design*, and *uses* of the mediation stated.

And

And when Chriſt is ſtiled a *mediator*, we can only learn from the *New Teſtament* what the word implies; and in that ſenſe *alone*, in which he is *there* repreſented under that character, are chriſtians oblig'd to *worſhip God through a mediator*. So that we ought not to *fanſy* difficulties *arbitrarily*, and frighten ourſelves with *mere ſounds*; but if we would proceed *fairly*, muſt conſider whether there are really any objections againſt the account which the *goſpel* gives of this matter.

AND the ſum of the Chriſtian doctrine is this, and this only. (1.) That we worſhip God in *the name* of Chriſt, *i. e.* according to *his directions*; encourag'd by the expreſs aſſurances, which God afforded the world *by him*, that he is a *propitious* being; and that our worſhip, form'd upon the *principles*, and conducted by the *rules*, which Chriſtianity preſcribes, will be *accepted*. (2.) That we worſhip him as that moſt *gracious* Being, the father of ALL mankind, who, *by Chriſt*, has given the *Gentile* world as well as the *Jews* a revelation of his will, and *expreſs promiſes* of pardon, and eternal life; ſo that *through him, we both have an acceſs, by one ſpirit, unto the father**. (3.) As a Being who has declar'd, that *we are reconciled to him by the death of his Son* †, who, for reaſons above explain'd, is repreſented as *putting away ſin*

* Eph. ii. 18. † Rom. v. 10.

by

by the sacrifice of himself *; the *wisdom*, and *goodness* of which constitution we are *thankfully* to acknowledge. St. *Paul* indeed speaks of Christ as *interceding* for us, in consequence of the sacrifice which he had offer'd; but, I apprehend, we are under no necessity to understand these passages *strictly*: for as the epistles, in which such language is used, were written to converted Jews *wholly*, or to churches where there was a mixture of *Jews* with *Gentiles*; he might only design by it (which appears plainly to have been his view in the greatest part of the epistle to the *Hebrews*) that there was something *analogous*, in the *Christian* religion, to what they so highly valued in the *Mosaic* institution; but of a much more *excellent* kind, and attended with more *extensive* and *lasting* advantages. (4.) Another thing implied in the Christian doctrine of *worshipping God through a mediator* is, that we consider him as one who governs us, and bestows blessings upon us, not *immediately* †, but by *Christ* ‡, whom, as a reward of his *perfect innocence*, and *voluntary sufferings* for the good of mankind, he has constituted, under himself, *Lord of all* ‖; *giving him all power in heaven, and in earth* **; by whom he has reveal'd his will to us, and given us laws; affords us *needful assistance* in the discharge of our duty, and *support* under our various trials; and will, at last, *judge*

* Heb. ix. 26. † Jo. v. 21, 23. ‡ 1 Cor. viii. 6.
‖ Acts x. 36. Phil. ii. 9, 10, 11. ** Matt. xxviii. 18.

the

the world in righteouſneſs, and render to every man according to his deeds *. And finally, that we worſhip Chriſt, as having the *mediatorial* kingdom conferr'd on him by the *Father*, and in obedience to his command †; aſcribing particularly *glory*, and *dominion* to him ‡, who, by the wiſe conſtitution of God, is our *ſaviour*, and *king*; but always in *ſubordination* to the *glory* of the *one God and Father of all*, who alone has a right to our *ſupreme* worſhip and obedience ||.

Now what is there in all this that is in the leaſt *diſhonourable* to God, or inconſiſtent with *any principle* of natural religion? Reaſon indeed could never have *diſcover'd* it, but, when it is reveal'd, can *object* nothing againſt it; and what, in the judgment of the moſt *ſtrict* and *impartial* reaſon, *may* be true, and belongs to a ſcheme of religion, which, in all the parts of it, has a viſible tendency to promote the higheſt *perfection* and *happineſs* of human nature, miracles undeniably prove to be *actually* true. The appointing the death of Chriſt to be conſider'd as a *ſacrifice* has already been *ſufficiently* vindicated; and this *unavoidably* infers the *reaſonableneſs* of worſhipping God under the character of that all-wiſe and moſt merciful Being, who has fix'd upon *this method* of pardoning ſinners, and receiving them into

* Acts xvii. 31. Rom. ii. 6, & 16 comp. † Jo. v. 23.
‡ Heb. xiii. 21. 2 Pet. ii. 18. Rev. v. 13. || Phil. ii. 11.

favour.

favour. —— His appointing Christ to manage, *under himself*, the government of the world, is repugnant to *no one principle* of reason; but on the contrary, there is a *beautiful congruity* between his being constituted our *Saviour*, and the *immediate bestower* of the divine blessings and favours upon mankind; and we can't but approve of God's rewarding, in so extraordinary a manner, a person of his *unspotted innocence*, and one who *generously condescended* to take upon him the human nature, and both *did*, and *suffer'd*, so much to maintain the cause of virtue, and promote our happiness. —— Then as for the *worship* which the New Testament directs us to pay to Christ, since 'tis no more than the respect which is *properly* due to one, whom God has invested with the characters of our *saviour*, and *ruler*, and made *head over all things to the church* *; it must be as *necessarily fit*, while *those relations* subsist, as the duties even of *natural morality*. And it can be no *derogation* from the *absolute* and *supreme* perfection of the *first*, and *greatest*, of beings, that an *inferior* is respected *in proportion* to his *merit* and *dignity*, and honour'd with *subordinate* worship, in obedience to his *express command*; because this is, really, an *act of homage* to *himself*, and an acknowledgement of his *unrival'd* and *matchless* excellence; and so far from *giving his glory to another*, that 'tis only offering that other what *he* could

* Eph. i. 22.

not

not receive; since it would be an *affront* and *disparagement* to him to be serv'd with any worship of an *inferior* kind, with any worship of which he is not the *supreme* and *ultimate* object, and all the reasons for which do not center *absolutely* and *entirely* in himself.

I SHALL only add, that the doctrine of *Christ's mediation* serves, in *general*, the *same* purposes with that of his *sacrifice*. For at the same time that it necessarily supposes God to be *propitious*, it impresses a constant sense of the *evil* of sin, and the sinner's *unworthiness* of the divine favour upon the account of it; and consequently is *a standing lecture of humility*. So that 'tis calculated, *in all ages*, to inspire *moral* sentiments of *universal* advantage (especially considering how apt mankind are to be *blind* to their own faults, and *presume* upon the mercy of God) and must, if rightly consider'd, be *always* a strong motive to *purity* and *virtue*.

FROM what has been said it appears, that the scripture doctrine of a *mediator* is entirely *rational*, and subservient to *moral* purposes; and that there is not the least foundation in it for those *low* and *unworthy* conceptions of the Deity, to which (as the author of *Christianity* &c. imagines) "the mediatory "Gods among the Heathen owe their rise *."

* *Christianity* &c. *p.* 86.

Nay,

Nay, the Christian revelation has, in its *general* doctrine, guarded so fully against all *such mistakes*, that 'tis impossible even for the *weakest* to fall into them, if they take their religion only from *thence* (which is a very reasonable expectation, at least among *Protestants*, whose fundamental principle 'tis, that the scriptures are their *only rule*) and not from *party schemes*, or the wild suggestions of *fancy* and *enthusiasm*. No Christian, who reads his *Bible* but with the *same* care with which he reads any the most common writings, can ever suppose (and that the adversaries of Christianity must know) that a *mediator* was appointed " either to suggest to the supreme " God some reasons he before was ignorant " of; or that by *his* importunities *he might* " prevail on his weakness, to do what other- " wise he was not willing to do †." And lest the people should be so *absurd* as to think, that the *mediator* had " a greater kindness " for, and readiness to do good to mankind " *than the supreme God himself*; and that *the* " solications of *the former* made *the latter* " better-natur'd than otherwise he would be; " *which* of course *would* take off their love " from the supreme *God*, and place it on *the* " *mediator*, upon whose powerful intercession " they so much depended *;" particular care is taken, throughout the *whole* New Testament, to ascribe this constitution *entirely* to the *love of God*, to his most *free*, *unconstrain'd*,

† *Christianity &c. p.* 86. * Ibid.

nay *unsollicited* goodness. He is described as the *original contriver* and *author* of it, prompted by nothing but his *essential* and *innate* benevolence; and Christ to have acted only by *his direction*, and according to the plan *his infinite wisdom* had form'd. So that 'tis not more *plainly*, nor so *frequently*, inculcated, that we are bound thankfully to acknowledge the *condescension* of *Christ* in the part he sustain'd, as that our *ultimate* obligations of love and gratitude are to the *supreme God*, and *Father of all*; *even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and God of all comfort* †, *who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings, in heavenly places, through him*; —— *Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children, by Jesus Christ, to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he has made us accepted in the beloved*; and *wherein he hath abounded towards us in all wisdom, and prudence* *.

THERE is one remark more, which our author hath made, that I think worth reciting: "However (says he) the heathens "allowing one, and but one most high God, "did not so far derogate from the honour of "the one true God, as to pretend that the "most distinguish'd among their several me-"diators was equal to him; *Equality* and *Me-"diation* being as inconsistent as *Equality* and

† 2 Cor. i. 3. * Eph. i. 3, 5, 6, 8.

"*Supre-*

" *Supremacy.* And they would have made " their religion an errant jumble, if they had " worshipped these Gods sometimes as me- " diators only; sometimes as sovereign dis- " posers of things; and sometimes as both " together †." I think it, I say, worth while to recite this passage, not because 'tis a just objection against *the Christian religion itself*, which teaches nothing at all of this *mysterious incomprehensible* divinity; but that christians may see how much it suffers by the *darkness* and *confusion* of *human* schemes, which are not only father'd upon it, but rank'd among its *fundamental* and most *important* doctrines. And, I hope, since this is a common cause (the honour of Christianity being evidently concern'd in it) they will all agree to lay aside *unscriptural subtilties*, and distinctive *party phrases*, and be content to represent the Christian doctrine just as they find it in the writings of the *New Testament*; and then they will have but *little* to fear from the *skill* or *malice* of its adversaries. For though some *modern scholastic explications* of it may be attended with *insuperable* difficulties, and always *distress* those who undertake the defence of them; the *original revelation itself* will, I am persuaded, stand the test of *reason*, and bear even a *severe* and *critical*, provided it be likewise an *honest* and *impartial*, examination.

† *Christianity* &c. *p.* 87.

And it will confirm us in this belief, that we find the most *able* of its opposers (not excepting the author of *Christianity* &c. himself) generally bend all their aim *this way*, and level their objections not against the New Testament *directly*, but against those gross *misrepresentations*, and *corruptions* of its genuine and real sense, which the *weakness* and *superstition* of men, or perhaps *worse causes*, have introduc'd; or if they sometimes attack the *original records* of our religion, 'tis by interpreting passages so *strictly* and *rigorously*, as could never be their most *obvious* and *natural* meaning; or else, by picking *little scraps* out of a *connected* discourse, that, *by themselves*, may well seem odd and unaccountble, and yet have a great propriety and beauty, when consider'd in *their connection*: which, it must be allow'd, is a more *cunning*, if it be not altogether *so fair* a way of proceeding. For 'tis much *safer* to fall upon the *confusions* and *inconsistencies* of *party writers*, than upon *original Christianity itself*; or if it be a man's design to *run down* any book whatever, the more *loosely* he reads, and the oftner he quotes passages *merely* for their *sound*, the better; the *less* he *understands* it, the *more fault* he is likely to find; and so the *number* of his objections, at least, which perhaps may influence some *weak* people, or others who are already *disaffected*; the *number*, I say, of his objections, if not the *weight*, will swell considerably. But that any persons

sons who act thus should assume the character of *free-thinkers*, and treat all the rest of the world as *bigots* and *enthusiasts*, is most amazing; since such a conduct is, in truth, the fartheſt distant that can be from a *generous* temper; and argues, on the contrary, besides intolerable *vanity* and *insolence*, great *narrowness* of mind, and the most *abject* and *slavish* prejudice.

THUS have I finish'd all that I proposed in this argument, and consider'd, so far as they affect either the *usefulness*, or the *truth* and *excellency*, of the christian revelation, all the *main reasonings* of the author of *Christianity* &c. in the *first* part of his design. And indeed, from what appears, he is determin'd to do *no farther* execution; so that there was no need of staying for the *second* part, which, if there be nothing in it but what the author hath promis'd, will be perfectly *harmless*. Nay, the most *valuable* part of it, (for I think we have but little concern with the sentiments of *Jews*, *Gentiles*, and *Mahometans*, or even of *the fathers of the church*, which are testimonies entirely *foreign* in a matter of *rational* enquiry, but are intended however for the *amplification* and *ornament* of the work;) the most valuable part of it, I say, is nothing *new*, and nothing but what has been perform'd most *excellently*, and with the greatest *strength of reason*, by several *christian* writers *. It may therefore be *justly*

* Vide *Christianity* &c. *p.* 427, 429.

preſum'd, that *whatever other works* of this kind the ingenious author may be engag'd in, they will not divert him from the more *neceſſary* buſineſs of *reviewing*, upon all proper occaſions, what he has already written; and that having appeal'd in it to the judgment of the *public*, he will not expect to be believ'd *implicitly*; but think himſelf oblig'd either to *defend* it, or elſe, in a *frank*, *open* manner acknowledge his miſtakes, like *an honeſt man*, and a *ſincere lover of truth*.

POST-

POSTSCRIPT.

WHAT I have ſaid concerning the *Sacrifice* of Chriſt being thought not to be the *true ſcripture doctrine* by ſome CHRISTIANS, whom I ſhould be very ſorry to offend, while I am maintaining the common cauſe of Chriſtianity againſt UNBELIEVERS; I think it proper to review it a little, and offer a few things for the farther explaining and illuſtrating this important ſubject.

I AM perſuaded, that thoſe who have excepted againſt what I have offer'd have, generally, *miſunderſtood* me. But as my meaning has been miſtaken, not only by common ſuperficial readers, but likewiſe by perſons, whoſe good ſenſe and judgment can't be diſputed; I muſt, in modeſty, ſuppoſe, that there is ſome *obſcurity* in the ac-

count which I have given, owing to this at leaſt, *viz.* to its being too *ſhort* and *general.*

To remove objections therefore, and ſet the matter in a clear light, I deſire it may be conſider'd, that the New Teſtament only lays down the doctrine relating to Chriſt's Sacrifice, but does not enter directly, and particularly, into the *reaſons* of it; whereas my only deſign was to ſhew, againſt the oppoſers of revelation, that this part of the Chriſtian doctrine is *wiſe* and *rational.* In order to which, I indeed took notice of ſome abſurd notions that are father'd upon Chriſtianity, though there is not the leaſt hint about them in the whole New Teſtament; but allow'd every thing that the Scripture has *plainly* and *diſtinctly* aſſerted upon this head, without the leaſt thought of evading the *grammatical* and *obvious* ſenſe of any of the texts, by ſtrain'd and unnatural criticiſms. I have expreſly affirm'd that "the death of Chriſt is very *fitly* repreſented "as a ſacrifice, nay, deſcribed in the ſtrong-"eſt ſacrifical phraſes *;" and gone all along upon the ſuppoſition, that the *firſt* and moſt *obvious* ſenſe of thoſe texts, *viz.* that *he appear'd to put away ſin by the ſacrifice of himſelf* †, *gave his life a ranſom for many* ‡, that we are *redeemed with the precious*

* P. 321. † Heb. ix. 26. ‡ Mat. xx. 28.

blood

blood of Christ *, and that *God sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins* †, and the like; I have gone all along, I say, upon the supposition, that the *first* and most *obvious* sense of those texts is, that *by the wise appointment of God*, we are to consider the death of Christ as the thing, *upon the account of which* he pardons our sins, and confers life and immortality upon us; I say, *by the appointment of God*, because the whole efficacy of it (the death of Christ not being *necessarily*, and *in its own nature*, an expiatory sacrifice) must arise from his *ordaining*, and *accepting* it as such. And if this be allow'd, let it be call'd the *term* or *condition* of our forgiveness, I shall not think it needful to dispute about *mere words*, when the utmost such expressions amount to can be no more than this, which I never denied, and now freely grant, that the all-wise Governour of the world *thought fit* to fix upon this method of pardoning sin, and, *in this way only*, to declare his accepting his guilty creatures upon their repentance, and reward their sincere, though imperfect, virtue.

FROM this short account, it will, I conceive, clearly appear, that I have not *misrepresented* the Christian doctrine relating to Christ's sacrifice, and that the objections against what I have written upon this head have been owing, in a great measure, to *a*

* 1 Pet. i. 18, 19. † 1 John iv. 10.

mis-

miſapprehenſion of my true deſign. Several of my readers ſeem to have imagin'd, that what I have offer'd was deſign'd as *an account of the ſcripture doctrine*, or as *an explication of texts*, nay, that I thought the word *ſacrifice* to ſignify, ſtrictly, *a memorial*. Whereas my only intention was to ſhew (allowing the doctrine itſelf to be juſt as it is repreſented in the writings of the New Teſtament, and taking the expreſſions there us'd in their moſt *obvious* and *natural* ſenſe) the wiſe ends that might be ſerv'd by it; or, in other words, without queſtioning in the leaſt that the death of Chriſt is, *by God's appointment*, *a propitiation*, *a ſacrifice*, *an atonement*, &c. to give ſome account of the *reaſons*, which may be ſuppos'd to have determin'd his infinite wiſdom to chooſe *this way* of ſhewing mercy to ſinners, and receiving them into favour. And my aſſigning as *a wiſe reaſon* for the inſtitution of ſacrifices, that they were *proper* and *uſeful memorials*, was a very clear intimation to the reader, that I had *different ideas* to the two words: For if the ideas were exactly the *ſame*, I muſt not only have thought that *ſacrifices* were *uſeful memorials*, but that every *uſeful memorial* is *a ſacrifice*; of which, I believe, I need not clear myſelf.

And ſince it appears, that thoſe texts, which repreſent the death of Chriſt as *a ſacrifice* for ſin, a *ſin-offering*, and the like,

and ſpeak of it in the *ſtrongeſt ſacrifical phraſes*, contain nothing inconſiſtent with what I have advanc'd, becauſe I have no diſpute, upon this head, with either friends, or enemies, of Chriſtianity (the not mentioning which particularly, in the foregoing diſcourſe, I acknowledge to have been a great defect, as it would probably have prevented the objections of many *honeſt* and *judicious* readers) I can think but of one paſſage, relating to the *doctrine itſelf*, that needs to be a little explain'd, and vindicated, *viz.* " that " the death of Chriſt would have happen'd " [*i. e.* ſo far as appears to us, or as we can " judge from what is reveal'd in the holy " ſcriptures] if it had never been deſign'd as " a ſacrifice; and conſequently was not ap- " pointed *abſolutely*, and *ſolely* with a view " to that *." Now this, which I apprehend to be of great importance in the preſent argument, I can, as yet, ſee no reaſon to recede from. I choſe to expreſs myſelf in this manner, becauſe the Goſpel-hiſtory moſt evidently repreſents the matter thus, *viz.* " that the Son of God, for publiſhing the " will of his heavenly Father in a corrupt " and degenerate age, was abuſed and per- " ſecuted, and by wicked hands crucified " and ſlain." This is *the plain fact* as it is there related; a fact, which it would be mere trifling to attempt to prove: and, in

* Page 316.

my

my opinion, it can't be denied, that the death of Chriſt was " the natural conſe-
" quence of his attempting to reform a
" corrupt and vitious people, and oppoſing
" their ſuperſtition, and darling prejudices," without deſtroying the truth of *that hiſtory*, and conſequently of *Chriſtianity itſelf*. Since therefore his death was " the natural con-
" ſequence of his integrity in his prophetic
" character," and could not have been avoided but by *inſincere* compliances on his part, or by a *miraculous* interpoſition; we muſt ſuppoſe " that it would have *actually*
" happen'd if it had never been appointed as
" a ſacrifice," or be forc'd to make *precarious ſuppoſitions*, about which *the New Teſtament is wholly ſilent*. And if, *as far as appears to us* (the Chriſtian revelation giving us no ground to carry our conjectures farther, and there being not the leaſt foundation in reaſon to ſuppoſe, that God would not have ſent his Son into the world with *this view only*, that he might make a revelation of his mind and will, ſuited to the corrupt and degenerate ſtate of the world, though he foreſaw it would end in his death) if I ſay, *as far as appears to us* " the death of Chriſt would have hap-
" pen'd, though it had never been appointed
" as a ſacrifice," it neceſſarily follows, that, *as far as we can judge*, " it was not ordain'd
" *abſolutely*, and *ſolely* with a view to that." Nay farther, we may fairly conclude, (at leaſt this is the *utmoſt* we can conclude, if we

go

go no farther than we have ſure principles to reaſon from) that the neceſſity of this method of pardoning ſin was not an *abſolute* neceſſity, but a neceſſity ariſing from *circumſtances*, or more properly, a *fitneſs* which the circumſtances of things ſuggeſted; *i. e.* in other words, it was fixed upon by the infinite wiſdom of God, which always does what is *beſt*, becauſe it was an over-ruling and directing *a natural event* to ſerve the *wiſeſt* and moſt *uſeful* purpoſe, for the honour of his government, and the good of his creatures. But on the other hand, whereas I have ſaid, that "the firſt view of God, in "ſending Chriſt into the world, was, that, as "prophet, he might reſtore the true religi-"on, *&c.**:" I ſhould now rather chooſe to expreſs myſelf thus, that he pitch'd upon ſo *great* and *excellent* a perſon, both that, by the *dignity* of his character, he might conciliate a greater *attention* and *regard* to his doctrine, and that the death of this divine meſſenger, which he foreſaw would happen, if not *miraculouſly* prevented, might anſwer the wiſe and valuable ends of *a ſacrifice for ſin*; without determining which of theſe was the *firſt*, or *principal*, reaſon. For it's probable that both of them together (ſince it appears they concur) and neither ſingly, influenc'd the all-wiſe governour of the world to employ his *only begotten Son* upon

* Page 317.

this

this occaſion; by whoſe mediation thoſe ends are more *effectually* promoted, than they could be by that of any other being whatſoever.

THE death of Chriſt was undoubtedly *predetermin'd*, but that does not prove that it did not happen in the *natural courſe* of things, *i. e.* in the ſame manner, and by the ſame kind of inſtruments, as the death of other prophets, and righteous men, who have preach'd repentance and reformation to an ignorant and degenerate age. So far indeed it may be aſcrib'd to God, that it could not have happen'd if he had not ſent him into the world; nay farther, that he ſent him when he *foreſaw* this conſequence of it, and upon that *fore-knowledge* how the event *would* be, if the malice of his enemies was ſuffer'd to take its courſe, determin'd not to *interpoſe*, but to *permit* it; or, in other words, determin'd that it *ſhould* be. But to proceed farther than this, we have, I think, no ground in *reaſon*, or warrant from *Holy Scripture*. On the contrary, St. *Peter* expreſly ſays, that our Saviour was *deliver'd by the determinate counſel, and fore-knowledge of God* *; the moſt *obvious* and *natural* ſenſe of which is, by the *purpoſe* of God to leave the *Jews* to themſelves, upon the *fore-knowledge* that they would then put him to death. And to

* Acts ii. 23.

argue

argue from *the nature of the thing itself*; as the deſtroying ſuch an innocent and uſeful perſon, a divine meſſenger, and the Son of God, was unqueſtionably a very *wicked* action, it will not, I preſume, be thought, that the moſt *wiſe*, and *holy* governour and judge of the world could have determin'd any thing about it *further*, than to ſuffer natural cauſes to operate, and the event (which he foreſaw would happen without a *miraculous* interpoſition) to take place.

HOWEVER, tho the *death* of Chriſt fell out in the natural courſe of things, it was not *thus a ſacrifice*. That was owing entirely to the *purpoſe* and *decree* of God, and conſequently, upon the fore-knowledge that his death would otherwiſe happen, was *abſolutely* predetermin'd, and in the *ſtrongeſt* and *fulleſt* ſenſe, that any texts, either in the Old or New Teſtament, ſpeak of it. I ſhall only add, that thoſe who believe that the death of Chriſt was *abſolutely* determin'd as *a ſacrifice*, otherwiſe than upon the fore-knowledge that it would happen in the manner it did, muſt be oblig'd to prove, that if there had been no need of his coming into the world as *a prophet*, he would have been ſent with no other view, than *to die*; nay farther, that if the *Jews*, who were *free agents*, and not under a *neceſſity* of putting him to death, inſtead of rejecting and perſecuting, had receiv'd and honour'd him as a prophet, God would *immediately*

mediately have interpos'd, and have appointed *the manner* in which, and *the inſtrument* by whom, he ſhould have been *directly offered as a Sacrifice*; which appear to me to be *mere imaginary* ſchemes, that have no foundation either in *reaſon*, or *revelation*.

NOTHING now remains, but briefly to review what I have offer'd concerning the *uſes of expiatory ſacrifices*, and particularly the *wiſe ends* that might be anſwer'd by God's appointing the *death* of Chriſt to be conſider'd under *that character*. And that no ſacrifices of this kind (nay not that of Chriſt himſelf) were deſign'd to *propitiate* the Deity, that they could not be neceſſary with reſpect to him, to *incline* him to be *favourable* and *gracious* to mankind, follows neceſſarily from hence, that they derive their whole efficacy and value from *his appointment*; and "the "very inſtitution of them" muſt, in the nature of the thing, ſuppoſe "that he was "already propitious*," *already diſpos'd* to be merciful and forgive the offences of his creatures, and only fix'd upon this as the moſt *rational* and *proper* way of diſpenſing his mercy. This I take to be *demonſtration*, to which nothing needs be added. However, we may obſerve, to ſtrengthen and confirm it farther, that the ſacrifice of Chriſt is repreſented, throughout the whole New Teſta-

* Page 320.

ment,

ment, as *proceeding* from the *love* and *compaſſion* of God towards mankind, but never as the *cauſe* of it; as the *effect* of his *mercy*, not the *argument* or *motive* inducing him to be *merciful:* this is the *conſtant ſtrain* of the Goſpel, and there is not ſo much as *a ſingle* paſſage which intimates the contrary.

In like manner, as ſacrifices derive *all their virtue* from God's ordaining and accepting them, and forgiveneſs of ſin is always deſcrib'd as an act of *free* and *voluntary* favour in the Deity; it plainly appears, that they neither were, nor could be, in the ſenſe in which I have us'd the expreſſion, *proper expiations*; i. e. that there was nothing, in their *abſtract nature*, that could atone for moral guilt, or merit pardon, or, in other words, that there was no *neceſſary connection* in reaſon, independent on the will and pleaſure of God, between offering the ſacrifice, and the forgiveneſs of the offender.

What other uſe then could they be deſign'd to ſerve (ſince they could neither be intended to propitiate our moſt merciful God, nor, in a *ſtrict* ſenſe, to *expiate* the guilt of ſin *) beſides that of being "ſtanding me-

* When the words, *propitiation* and *expiation*, are uſed in ſcripture, they have, I apprehend, a very different meaning: and the truth of the caſe I take to be this. God was inclin'd, by his *innate goodneſs and mercy*, to pardon the ſins of mankind upon their repentance, and receive them into favour; but at the ſame

" morials of God's reconcileableneſs, for in-
" ſtance, and readineſs to forgive his guilty
" creatures upon their repentance, of his
" ſtrict and abſolute purity, and of the great
" evil and demerit of ſin?" And what other reaſon, can we ſuppoſe, determin'd his infinite wiſdom to appoint them, but their *moral influence*, and particularly, that he might exerciſe his mercy towards mankind in ſuch a manner, as would moſt *effectually* ſupport the practice of *virtue*, and diſcourage *vice* and *wickedneſs?* By this method of grace and pardon, he has moſt awfully demonſtrated his *ſpotleſs purity*, and *irreconcileable averſion to ſin*, and wiſely maintain'd the *honour* of his moral government, by doing what is beſt calculated to promote the *great end* of it, the perfection and happineſs of his ſubjects.

I HOPE what I have now added will ſatisfy the *friends* of Chriſtianity, as well as

ſame time was reſolv'd to do it in ſuch a way as would be moſt *honourable* to his *perfections* and *government*, and conſequently was moſt becoming a *wiſe* and *holy* governour. As the ſacrifice of Chriſt therefore, which he appointed, though it did not *incline* him to be merciful, is the way in which he choſe *actually* to diſpenſe his mercy, Chriſt is *the propitiation:* and becauſe it is the method in which he *actually forgives* our offences, and diſcharges us upon our ſincere repentance, from guilt; in this ſenſe it may be ſtiled an Expiation. And 'tis upon the ſame account that we are ſaid to be *reconciled to God by the death of his ſon*, Rom. 5. 10. though we never meet in the New Teſtament with ſuch an expreſſion as this, that *God was* thereby *reconcil'd to us*; becauſe, perhaps, it would convey to the bulk of mankind *a very different idea*, contrary to what has been ſhewn to be the reaſon of the thing, and the *general tenour* of the *Chriſtian revelation.*

ſilence

ſilence the cavils of its *adverſaries.* And I can aſſure the reader, that as I would not pay ſo much deference to human explications of ſcripture, how *popular* ſoever, as to betray any *important* and *uſeful* truth; ſo neither would I deviate, in the leaſt, from *commonly receiv'd* principles, for the ſake of being *ſingular.*

FINIS.

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